



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in
Lingue Moderne per la Comunicazione e la Cooperazione Internazionale
Classe LM-38

Tesi di Laurea

Agatha Christie as a rule breaker in the crime fiction game

Relatore
Prof.ssa Marilena Parlati

Correlatore
Prof. Rocco Coronato

Laureanda
Chiara Paparella
n° matr.1179851 / LMLCC

Anno Accademico 2018 / 2019

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
1. Genesis of Crime Fiction: Establishing the Rules	13
1.1 Some Definitions	13
1.2 Detective Stories: Main Ingredients and How to Combine Them	14
1.3 Critical Points and Reasons for its Success	17
1.4 Sub-genres of Crime Fiction	20
1.5 The Origins	22
1.5.1 Edgar Allan Poe: the Father of Crime Fiction	22
1.5.2 Gaboriau and the Canonization of the Detective Character	25
1.5.3 Further Steps in the Development of Crime Fiction	26
1.5.4 The Most Famous Detective in Crime Fiction	27
1.5.5 The Golden Age	32
1.6 Detectives and Their Helpers	33
1.7 The Victim and the Murderer	36
1.8 The “Rules of the Game”	37
2. Agatha Christie: Breaking the Rules	43
2.1 A Brief Outline of Agatha’s Life	44
2.2 A Creative Genius	45
2.3 The Role of the Narrator in <i>The Murder of Roger Ackroyd</i>	49
2.4 Everyone or no one? <i>Murder on the Orient Express</i> and its Ambiguous Solutions	56

2.5 <i>And Then There Were None</i> : Guilty until Proven Dead	62
2.6 <i>Curtain</i> and the Other Side of the Sleuth	71
3. Game as a Leitmotiv in Christie's Novels	81
3.1 <i>The ABC Murders</i> ' Homicide Hunt	82
3.2 Ladies and Gentlemen, Place your Bets! Who Did it in <i>Cards on the Table</i> ?	87
3.3 A Startling Combination of Crime and Children Verses	92
3.3.1 <i>One, Two, Buckle My Shoe</i> : When the Important Clue Lies in the Title	94
3.3.2 Five Little... Suspects	98
3.3.3 <i>A Pocket Full of Rye</i> : Between Nursery Rhymes and Reality	100
Appendix	105
Bibliography	107
Riassunto	115

Introduction

Agatha Christie is one of the best-known, translated and printed crime writers of all times. Her plots and her way to write them have always fascinated me. I have always enjoyed her brilliant solutions, which have stunned me since I was a child. Nothing could have replaced my feeling of completeness, as I closed the book after having read it until the last page. That is why I have chosen to write about her in my final thesis. As her literary production is extremely wide, I cannot claim I can cover it all; that would be impossible. Obviously, my focus had to be more specific than that and I knew from the beginning that I had to leave something behind; for instance, I have never taken into account the possibility of examining Christie's spy stories or the books she wrote under the pseudonym of Mary Westmacott. I eventually came up with the idea of linking crime novels and games: the focus of my thesis is therefore to look at game in crime novels, that is how a crime novel, and specifically Christie's novels, can be conceived as a game, complete with its proper rules. Moreover, I have tried to show how Christie rewrites them, using literary tradition as a starting point to make something new. Finally I have analyzed game in Christie's novels and specifically how she deals with it.

Seeing a crime novel as a game has more than one implication: first of all, it is a game between writers and readers. Writers challenge readers to measure their shrewdness, implicitly claiming that they can fool them with a *dénouement* they can never guess. On the other hand, readers engage in a race against the flow of pages, to try and measure their wits against the writers'. Readers must rely on the clues which the narrator provides for them, in order to prove themselves capable of solving the author's riddles. The problem is that not all the clues are genuine: some of them are artificial and have been placed there in order to mislead both the detective and the readers. But the readers do not possess the sleuth's abilities and knowledge and therefore end up off the scent. Their pleasure is eventually to observe the mastermind's work (Grella

32). In this role-playing game, the “true” writer is able to balance the amount of proper clues and false clues, as too many false clues could excessively bewilder the readers and cause their loss of interest in the plot. In addition to that, the readers are keen on accepting the risk of being deceived in this asymmetric game, - for the readers can never have the first move or take the lead - because their supreme excitement lies in the challenge of choosing the right strategy and deciding what to trust and when to trust (Bruss 162), rather than in guessing *whodunit*. As a matter of fact, in crime fiction, it is actually never rewarding for the readers to guess halfway through who the murderer is. According to Merrill, indeed, “to win would be to lose, for to unravel the crime before Poirot would expose the plot’s inadequate ingenuity” (Merrill 94). It is in fact that sense of suspense, which catches the readers’ attention until the end of the book. In other words, for a crime fiction lover, the pride of having proved oneself cleverer than the writer cannot match the satisfaction of discovering the truth after having been totally on the wrong path. Deep down, therefore, odd as it may seem, readers experience an extreme form of satisfaction when they cannot solve the writer’s enigma.

Furthermore, a detective novel is a game between the detective and the murderer as well. There are very few instances in which the murderer wins and Agatha Christie provides her readers with one of them. In 1937 the collection of short stories *Poirot’s Early Cases* came out. One of these short stories, “The Chocolate Box”, is the sole occurrence in which Poirot investigates and fails. He misinterprets clues and comes to the wrong conclusion. But this is indeed an exception; detectives usually win, so that social and legal order can be restored. In order for the detective to win, he has to avoid the red herrings and the false clues that the murderer places to misdirect the investigation.

The crime fiction game, as each self-respecting game, has its proper rules and possesses its standard components: a goal, that is to find the murderer, “a field or playing board (setting), players (murderer, suspects, sleuth), devices used to reach the goal (clues), barriers and handicaps (cover-up

schemes including red herrings), and rules for fair play (conventions of the genre)” (Maida and Spornick 70). Detective novelists have set these rules starting from Edgar Allan Poe’s legacy. In the first chapter of my dissertation I have looked at the process of rule setting, which took place in the years before Christie’s literary rise. Not only the very famous Arthur Conan Doyle, but also Émile Gaboriau, Gaston Léroux and Wilkie Collins are worth to be mentioned. Each of them introduced his new elements and contributed in shaping the detective novel’s model. Gaboriau made significant steps towards the canonization of the detective figure; Leroux invented the closed room mystery, whereas Collins shifted the focus from the crime to the investigation process.

Conan Doyle was a model for the first novels by Christie. His main characters, Holmes and Watson, are a source of inspiration for Christie’s detective Hercule Poirot and his sidekick Captain Hastings. In the 1920s, the period in which the popularity of crime novels reached its peak, rules for crime fiction were considered so important that authors such as Van Dine and then Knox decided to write them down. Furthermore I have focused my attention on the reasons of crime fiction’s success: basically, reading detective stories is so rewarding for readers, because their expectations and their inner need for order and justice are fulfilled. I particularly agree with Chesterton’s statement¹, according to which the reader only enjoys detective stories when “he feels a fool” (Chesterton 1930). This is certainly one of the most important reasons why readers appreciate detective fiction. Moreover, after having outlined the figures of the detectives and their helpers, I have sketched the characters of the victim and the murderer. For this chapter, which is more theoretical, I have found a considerable number of sources, including crime fiction history textbooks and scholarly essays. In order to look into the matter of detective fiction’s development I have based my work on these sources and I also relied

¹ Gilbert Keith Chesterton was an English writer, journalist and aphorist who lived between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. An eclectic writer, he also engaged himself in crime fiction.

on some of Poe's and Doyle's primary texts, such as "The Purloined Letter", *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*.

In the second chapter I have tried to shed light on the following quotation from one of Christie's experts, Earl F. Bargainnier: according to him "Christie accepts the formulas and conventions of her genre and yet is able to find seemingly numberless variations within and for them." (Bargainnier 201). In order to try and explain what he means, I have focused specifically on the Queen of Crime, as Christie is generally referred to, thus giving an overview of how she broke with the tradition. I have delved into the following novels, which are also the most innovative: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), *And Then There Were None* (1939) and *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* (1975). Some of her new elements were so groundbreaking that her contemporaries did not understand her genius. I am referring to the episode of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd's* scandal, which will be analyzed in depth in the second chapter of this thesis. Christie's opponents heavily criticized her and accused her of cheating and not caring about the rules of fair play. Indeed, according to them, Christie reportedly misused the asymmetry in crime game between authors and readers. Personally, I have not felt cheated as I finished the book. All I felt was deep enthusiasm and appreciation for Christie's brains, and for the way she makes her murderer play hide and seek with truth. In my opinion, rereading this novel could be an interesting experience to enjoy the witty double meanings of the murderer's statements. As for *Murder on the Orient Express* and *And Then There Were None*, these novels are so innovative, that they are arguably her two most famous works. In the former, Christie broke the one-culprit rule, because in the end all the passengers were involved in the murder. In *And Then There Were None* she showed all her skills in inventing an almost unsolvable clue puzzle, which goes against one of the simplest readers' assumptions: someone who is dead cannot be the murderer. The riddle here derives from the fact that the only ten people on an island all die apparently killed by someone else. In the end the

reader will find out that the killer is not the last one to die. In this novel Christie also uses a nursery rhyme as a frame for the deranged killer's scheme. On the whole, these three novels have something in common, which concerns the culprit: the murderer is always disguised. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*'s case it is no less than the narrator himself, whereas in *And Then There Were None* the murderer is hidden in the guise of one of the victims, which furthermore seemed to have taken the investigation's lead; finally in *Murder on the Orient Express* it is disguised in... all the passengers. On the other hand, in *Curtain* Christie stages Poirot's demise, itself already interesting enough as a literary phenomenon; but what is more is Poirot's metamorphosis from detective to killer. The theme of unaccomplished justice is shared by three of these four novels: in *Murder on the Orient Express* the killers are not punished in the end and, moreover, they act out of revenge towards a murderer who had got away with his crime in the past; and the same happens in *And Then There Were None* where the characters who become victims had already killed in the past, whereas in *Curtain* Poirot is forced to turn into a killer because the culprit is too smart to be framed by the law. All these new elements testify why Bargainnier argues that Christie knew the limits of crime fiction as a genre, "but, even more important, she was also able to find enormous variety within those limits." (Bargainnier 201).

Finally, a strong connection with the topic of game can be traced in Agatha Christie's literary work. Not only is game the frame in which some of her fictional homicides take place (see the paragraphs concerning *The ABC Murders* and *Cards on the Table*), but also references to gaming devices such as nursery rhymes are surprisingly frequent in Christie's novels. Agatha Christie uses nursery rhymes in various ways: with reference to the rhyme "One, Two, Buckle My Shoe", which is also her novel's title, Christie uses it as a metaphor for the investigation steps and, in addition to that, gives the readers some indications to spot an important clue. As for the rhyme "Five Little Pigs", each line introduces a different little pig; what Christie does in her book, also called

Five Little Pigs, is to forge her suspects according to the different little pigs of the nursery rhyme. For instance, according to the nursery rhyme's first line, the first little pig goes to the market; in the same way the first character and suspect whom Christie introduces is a successful stockbroker, a businessman. Another nursery rhyme, "Sing a Song of Sixpence", is instead the source of inspiration for the murderer in *A Pocket Full of Rye*. The aim of this dissertation's third chapter is to explain these connections in detail. The novels which have been analyzed in this chapter are certainly not the only ones that could have been taken into consideration, as some other books could have been chosen (*A Murder is Announced*, *Dead Man's Folly*, *Hickory Dickory Dock*, *The Crooked House* and so on). However, I have selected only a few of Christie's novels because I reckoned that the link with the game topic or the nursery rhyme was particularly evident. In writing this third chapter, I relied mostly on Agatha Christie's books. As these novels are not as well known as the novels which have been analyzed in the second chapter, I have found fewer secondary sources than I expected. The analysis revealed that a significant number of Agatha Christie's novels are connected to game, and even more to nursery rhymes. And the remark which startles her readers most is that these connections are not always drawn in the same way: sometimes they are in the murderer's head, as a sort of plan, and sometimes they are in the detective's solution; what is more, sometimes they concern the plot and sometimes the characters' description. Christie seems to have a sort of proclivity for modeling her stories on children verses, or adapting her fictional characters to rhymes' characters.

Christie uses more than one technique concerning the culprit: she sometimes uses the most likely suspect technique, as in *Hickory Dickory Dock* for instance; in this novel, the hypothesis that the man was guilty had been formulated several times before Poirot proved that he was actually guilty. This does not mean that the book is less interesting to read. On the contrary, the reader's surprise comes exactly from this suspect technique. Furthermore,

Merrill argues that “Christie is fond of implicating the most likely suspect. [...] She takes great delight in seeming to exonerate the “obvious” candidate by means of an apparently unshakeable alibi, then revealing this person to be the guilty party after all” (Merrill 90). He suggests that *And Then There Were None* is a suitable example of the most-likely-suspect plot: judge Wargrave seems to be the only character who has enough brains to plan all the murders, but at a certain point he seems to be exonerated by death. Therefore, according to Merrill, Christie wins the crime fiction game because she forces her readers to “entertain unlikely solutions [they] cannot dismiss even though [they] cannot believe in them” (Merrill 90).

On the other hand, sometimes Christie uses the least likely suspect technique; in these cases, the actual culprit was not suspected in the first place because “he or she appears to be the intended victim or is a member of the investigating team” (Merrill 92). Christie enjoys this least suspect technique because in *Cards on The Table* she makes Mrs Oliver – her alter ego – say: “It is always the least likely person who did it!” (*Cards on the Table*, quoted by Merrill 92). *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is the most obvious example, but one could also cite other Christie novels, such as *Death Comes as the End*, *Peril at End House* and so forth. Actually Christie shows to prefer apparently intricate situations, which are actually very simple (Christie, *Autobiography* 262). Following Hercule Poirot or Jane Marple through these winding paths, or simply trying to play detection, the reader draws pleasure from this narrative game.

Taking everything into consideration, I have shown what it means to consider detective novels in terms of games, and I have looked at how Agatha Christie, taking tradition as a starting point, changes the rules of this game, thus earning the sobriquet of Queen of Crime. Furthermore, I have illustrated that game and nursery rhymes are recurrent themes in Christie’s novels.

1. Genesis of Crime Fiction: Establishing the Rules

Crime fiction is a narrative genre which had its beginnings in the mid-to-late 19th century. It soon became both a global literary phenomenon and a consumer article, due to the fact that it fulfills the readers' needs by dealing with the quest for truth and the eternal fight between good and evil, in which good always prevails. It is interesting to note that, even if the narrative path which leads to the mystery's *dénouement* is always made up of more or less the same elements, detective fiction catches a large part of the readers' preferences still today; so much so that after more than 150 years from the rise of the genre, old detective novels are still turned into successful movies.

1.1 Some Definitions

Trying to formulate the exact definition of the term “detective fiction” provides a starting point for this analysis. According to Symons (quoted by Ercoli 33) it is a genre which deals with a crime committed in unclear circumstances. Haycraft (also quoted by Ercoli 32) offers an alternative by stating that detective fiction's focus has to be the investigation. According to Scaggs, instead, detective fiction is

A type of fiction centred around the investigation of a crime that focuses attention on the method of detection by structuring the story around a mystery that appears insoluble through normal investigative methods. For this reason it is also known as mystery fiction. Detective fiction, by focusing on the method of detection, simultaneously focuses attention on the figure of the methodical detective: that is, the detective who follows a particular method. (Scaggs 144)

Holman agrees with Haycraft, and up to a point with Scaggs. He maintains that “(t)he detective story is one in which the primary interest lies in the methodical discovery by rational means of the exact circumstances of a mysterious event or series of events, usually posing a puzzling problem concerning a crime”

(Holman 1), and he tells detective stories from mystery stories and even from crime stories. The boundaries, which are often blurred for the readers, depend on where the emphasis of the plot is posed. Crime stories are stories which regard criminals, their crimes, the events which lead to them, and their aftermath, whereas mystery stories are strictly connected to a mysterious event, which may even remain unsolved. In other words, if a detective novel were not sorted out, it would rather be a crime novel or a mystery novel. Investigation does not play such an important role in them (Holman 1). However, one of the main themes of the detective novel is in any case mystery. Most of the times, but not necessarily, murder is involved (cfr. Poe's first work). However, almost no author pays attention to these distinctions during the writing process. As a consequence, the differences among detective stories, crime stories and mystery stories are, in most cases, not so clear-cut. In the following pages the terms "crime novel" and "detective novel" will be used indistinctly as synonyms.

1.2 Detective story: Main Ingredients and how to Combine Them

The most influential literary factors in the process which lead to the birth of detective story were the following: first of all detection, in the form of a rigorous logical reasoning based on observation, which was theorized in Voltaire's *Zadig* (1747) for the first time; the narrative threads of escape and chase which can be found in Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794); the growing care for delinquency in Britain and France, which became of literary interest at the end of the 17th century; the spreading of a sort of rationalized mystery, that is a variety of horror story, and of scientific knowledge (Del Monte, Introduction).

According to Hühn, the plot of a detective story embeds two separate tales at once: the first refers to something which happened in the past and concerns the story of the murder; the whole point of the detective fiction is to uncover this unclear story (Hühn 451-452), which is therefore read and told by

the detective. This usually happens in the last chapter, as is often the case in a scene which is called the “confrontation scene”. The detective reunites all the characters in a room and tells how things truly went. The second story deals with the investigation and is told in some cases by a narrator, also known as Watson-figure from the famous companion of Sherlock Holmes. Otherwise the narrator is external and tells the tale using the 3rd person singular. This story is mainly addressed to the readers, who enjoy disentangling themselves from this double narrative. People are usually fond of it because it is always problematic and, although they do not like problems, they adore uncovering their solutions. There are a bunch of suspects and the criminal, despite knowing that murder leaves traces, tries to conceal the proofs or to make them point to another direction. In this way the readers are puzzled and the detective’s skills can emerge.

Overall, the typical detective story features a group of characters in a closed place, usually but not always a house. Everything goes well until peace is shattered by a character’s death. As Cawelti argues,

The peaceful beginning [...] establishes a point of departure and return for the story. The crime symbolizes not only an infraction of the law but a disruption of the normal order of society. It is something extraordinary that must be solved in order to restore the harmonious mood of that charming scene by the blazing fireplace. (Cawelti 83)

The police investigate but evidence make no sense and the investigators fumble around in the dark. In the meantime a sleuth starts to gather clues and to connect the dots and eventually discloses the solution to the riddle. On the whole a detective story is an easily readable book, which contains neither long descriptions nor digressions of any kind (e.g. philosophical, historical and so forth). Conversely it displays a quick style, which has the important function of keeping the readers’ attention up. This certainly is another reason why detective stories have become such a consumer kind of narrative. Grella compares detective fiction to a comedy of manners, in which every character has its fixed

temperament and is a recognizable type. Speaking in a comedy of manners terms, the criminal shatters peace, and this is the point where the sleuth, that is to say the comic hero, makes his entrance on the scenes and gets rid of the obstacles which impede the way to happiness, just like the shrewd servant. The reader takes pleasure in seeing how the author manages the stock characters and alters them (Grella 40). The main motive for the parallel is of course the fact that both crime fiction and comedy of manners end positively with a restored peace. Moreover, in crime fiction, plots resemble those of the comedy of manners, because they are intricate and they are often based on “mistaken motives, confusion and dissembling” (Grella 33). Another parallel, Grella says, is the expulsion of a socially undesirable character, so that the others can have their peace. In detective novels’ case two characters are expelled: the victim, because they die, and the murderer, because they get caught and are condemned.

On the other hand, Malmgren draws a parallel between detective fiction and the Saussurian theory of sign, signifier and signified. The mystery, as a sign, leaves behind clues, which in Malmgren’s theory act as signifiers, and are strictly connected to a signified, that is their meaning. Thus, in order to sort out a mysterious crime, the detective is able to restore the semantic order of things, by giving each piece of evidence (signifier) its correct meaning (signified) (Malmgreen 6); for instance, he is able to connect traces in the mud to a cab traces, and infer that a specific type of cab was on the crime scene, as Holmes did in *A Study in Scarlet*. Taking everything into consideration, the necessary ingredients of crime fiction can be summarized as follows:

- A crime, most often murder, is committed early in the narrative.
- There are a variety of suspects with different motives.
- A central character formally or informally acts as the detective.
- The detective collects evidence about the crime and its victim.

- Usually the detective interviews the suspects, as well as witnesses.
- The detective solves the mystery and indicates the real criminal.
- Usually this criminal is now arrested or otherwise punished. (Danyte 5)

On the other hand, according to Cawelti, the “pattern of action” of a detective story can be schematized as follows:

(a) introduction of the detective; (b) crime and rules; (c) investigation; (d) announcement of the solution; (e) explanation of the solution; (f) denouement. These parts do not always appear in sequence and are sometimes collapsed into each other, but it is difficult to conceive of a classical story without them. (Cawelti 82)

1.3 Critical Points and Reasons for its Success

According to some scholars, the quick, ornament-free style and its being a consumer literature have made detective fiction inferior, or even not worth studying. Other voices of disapproval say that characters in crime fiction are too flat and “two-dimensional” (Wilson quoted in Ramsey 40), that is, they are not given psychological insights. On one hand, it is true that some characters, especially some sleuths, may possess artificial features, or may seem, in a way, fixed, but on the other hand crime fiction is no *Bildungsroman*; detective novelists are not interested in giving their characters psychological depth, simply because that is not the point of the whole story. Due to the absence of psychological depth, readers may find it difficult to identify with one of the characters, also because, as Ramsey points out, all the characters are suspects, and the reader may not want to feel close to somebody who is probably a murderer (Ramsey 40). Neither can readers by any means be fascinated by detective fiction because of its verisimilitude: crimes portrayed in detective stories, especially in *whodunits* – also known as clue-puzzles – are very different from real crimes. In most cases, fictional crimes are not at all as brutal and violent as the real ones, whose “plot” is generally much simpler, or at least

not constructed as a riddle (Haycraft 229). Though fictional and real motives for crime may be the same, namely jealousy, money and so forth, real crimes tend to be more irrational and not so carefully planned as they are in detective fiction. However, despite all these critical views, detective fiction has always fascinated its readers with its peculiar appeal. There is undoubtedly more than the simple eagerness to know who the culprit is. First of all, there is the desire to measure one's deductive skills and engage the challenge with the detective. But, as readers do not possess the necessary knowledge, they will be easily tricked and will end up following red herrings and missing the important clues. Furthermore, the straightforward plot is certainly a factor. In a detective novel there is no room for existential problems and philosophical questions. The main theme is the battle against evil and justice, and the fact that justice always prevails is said to meet people's emotional needs in the interwar period (Ercoli 37). Ercoli also argues that readers may identify themselves either with the murderer or with the detective. In the first scenario, readers may find a means to relieve their tension and their unconscious sense of guilt, in a sort of catharsis of their violent impulses. The need to restore an inner harmony, in which order and justice triumph, may derive from the identification with the detective (Ercoli 37-38). In the last chapter truth will out and in most cases the "bad guys" will be punished. This provokes a sense of reassurance and satisfaction in readers (Franks 8), who feel that everything goes to its natural place in the book, and the balance between good and evil is restored again. Professor Roy Fuller, as reported by Holman (2), traces detective fiction's appeal back to the Oedipus myth. In Fuller's opinion, readers enjoy detective stories because they can free themselves from that Oedipus complex which lies as a burden in their mind. As a matter of fact, there are some mutual elements between detective fiction and Oedipus myth. Fuller recalls "illustrious victim, the preliminary riddles, the incidental love interest, the gradual uncovering of the past, the unlikeliest criminal", but on the other hand these elements are not enough to say that readers enjoy detective stories as a means of unconsciously

getting rid of Oedipus complex. Once again Holman, quoting W. H. Auden, reports another thoroughly psychological answer to the question why readers enjoy detective stories so much. Auden compares detection to the “Arthurian Quest of the Holy Grail” (Auden quoted by Holman 2), and maintains that crime abruptly breaks the idyllic peace in which crime stories are set and readers feel that their sense of guilt is lightened, because it is transferred to the story’s characters. Furthermore Grella (31) argues that everyone enjoys matching their reasoning capacity with the detective’s and trying to unravel the truth, but the reader does not possess the knowledge that this task requires. That is not a big deal for the reader, who, according to Grella, draws pleasure even simply from observing the detective genius at work. In conclusion, readers adore detective stories because they see that, through the use of logical reasoning, order gradually emerges from what seemed chaos, and this conveys a great sense of satisfaction.

Leaving aside philosophical and general reasons for a moment, a more concrete explanation remains on stage. It is provided by Chesterton, himself a significant detective novels writer. According to him “The detective story differs from every other story in this: that the reader is only happy if he feels a fool.” (Chesterton, *The Ideal Detective Story*, 1930). It goes indeed without saying that readers enjoy detective stories more if they do not manage to guess the solution. But when a detective story is really good, they read the book up to the last chapter with no clue of who the murderer is, or sometimes even being convinced that the killer is a certain character, and then... *coup de théâtre*! The solution is revealed, and readers cannot avoid thinking that it was simple and the truth has been just in front of them all the time. These are the real thoughts of someone who has loved a detective novel.

1.4 Sub-genres of Crime Fiction

Over the decades crime fiction has evolved in a plethora of sub-genres: clue-puzzles, also known as *whodunits* or *whodunnits* were extremely popular from the 1920s to the 1930s. The name echoes the question “who did it?”, which is “at the heart of all stories of mystery and detection” (Scaggs 35). The key to their success was that they involved readers in the investigation process, inviting them to take part in the detection process, and challenging them in a certain way to solve the conundrum before the books disclose the solution. In order to do that, the reader must be provided with all the necessary clues, and must be able to tell useful evidence from clues which lead to red herrings. The *whodunit*, therefore, places its emphasis on ingenious plot and logic, which is necessary to sort this kind of riddles out. Differently from the hard-boiled sub-genre, it did not survive the Second World War, because logical certainty and order were probably unsuitable in post-war times (Scaggs 27-28). Agatha Christie (1890-1976) was the undisputed queen of the *whodunit*.

Hard-boiled crime fiction distinguishes itself considerably from the *whodunit* type of crime fiction, for it is tougher and cynical. The setting is also different: most of the times *whodunits* take place in a house, or in a rural background, whereas hard-boiled novels are set in a big city, mostly American. They are often connected to gangsters (Scaggs 29). More common in the United States, they tended to reproduce reality in its cruelty and violence. Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961) and Raymond Chandler (1888-1959) have been successful hard-boiled crime writers.

Private eye detective fiction is so remarkably similar to hard-boiled fiction, that in some handbooks it is considered one of its sub-genres. Its name is a pun, because it stands for both the “private investigator” (P.I.) and the private sight of the genre, highly focused on the investigator: its protagonists are, in fact, detectives, either male or female, but they are very different from classical *whodunit* sleuths. First of all they do not play detection as a hobby but

work on their own, and their analytic deduction does not play such an important role anymore. One of the most significant private eye fiction writers is Raymond Chandler (Scaggs 59-60).

Police procedural is a more modern sub-genre, which focuses on the methods used by a police officer or a group of police officers, among which the collection of scientific evidence, interviewing suspects and so on. Therefore, the literary market undergoes a transition from the private “I” of the investigator to the sphere of public police officers. Police procedurals started to develop in the United States in the late 1950s and they reflected a need for realism. As a consequence, its natural setting is urban (Scaggs 88-89). Examples of this kind of crime fiction are the Harry Bosch novels by Michael Connelly (1956-). This literary sub-genre in particular has later been turned into successful movies and TV shows.

Spy fiction is similar to a detective mystery in which the protagonist is rather a spy than a sleuth and he or she has to either conspire or unveil a conspiracy. Espionage fiction concerns national rivalries, and experienced its most popular period in the 1960s (Seed 115). Therefore it is very likely to have been fuelled by the political tensions of the Cold War. John Buchan (1865-1940), John le Carré (1931-) and Ian Fleming (1908-1964) are listed among the most famous spy stories writers. Fleming is particularly well-known, as he gave birth to James Bond, arguably the most famous secret agent of all times.

Thriller is also considerably divergent from detective story, as its sole aim is to produce tension and excitement (Scaggs 148), therefore detection does not play such an important role. Glover gives a thorough explanation of the difference between the two genres:

Where the thriller differs from the detective story is not in any disinclination to resort to deductive methods in solving crimes – though, to be sure, when present they necessarily occupy only a secondary role. Rather, the thriller was and still is to a large extent marked by the way in which it persistently seeks to raise the stakes of the narrative, heightening or exaggerating the experience of events by transforming them into a rising curve of danger, violence or shock (Glover 137).

Thrillers have themselves developed into sub-genres, which include legal thrillers, psychological thrillers, noir thrillers, political thrillers, forensic thrillers and so forth. Among them legal thrillers have known remarkable success. As the name suggests, this particular kind of mystery novel plunges the reader into the legal world of attorneys, judges, courts and trials. An attorney plays the role of the sleuth, usually in order to prove his or her client innocent. Recent examples of legal thriller writers are Michael Connelly, with his Mickey Haller books, and John Grisham (1955-). In Noir fiction criminals are lower-class characters who consciously break the law for their personal gain. Noirs are usually dominated by crude violence and strong amorality. A great noir novels writer was John M. Cain (1892-1977).

Historical crime fiction is another sub-genre of detective fiction. Its main characteristic is to take place in whatever a period in the past, be it for instance Ancient Greece or Rome or Middle Ages. It can be set either entirely in the past, or it can feature a contemporary investigator trying to solve a past mystery. The greatest concern for this type of crime fiction writers is care for historical details and verisimilitude. Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) is a suitable example of historical crime fiction novel. Agatha Christie has also set one of her novels – *Death Comes as the End* (1944) – in Ancient Egypt.

1.5 The Origins

1.5.1 Edgar Allan Poe: the Father of Crime Fiction

When it comes to crime fiction one cannot help but mention Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), the undisputed father of the genre. The industrialization of the printing process, which was going on in those years, enabled Poe to become soon an editorial phenomenon. Scholars agree that “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) has to be considered the first detective story, and its detective, Dupin, the first sleuth in the crime fiction history. He sets the base for one of the staples of following detective fiction, that is the so-called “armchair

detective". It is a kind of detective, mostly an amateur, who solves crimes by means of his intellectual skills, basing the deductive process on evidence found. Dupin, himself a deductive genius and quite an eccentric man, would become a reference figure for many following crime writers. His friend and helper in the investigation, who is also the story's narrator, introduces him with these words:

Paris! In Paris it was, in the summer of 1840. There I first met that strange and interesting young fellow, August Dupin. Dupin was the last member of a well-known family, a family which had once been rich and famous; he himself, however, was far from rich. He cared little about money. He had enough to buy the most necessary things of life — and a few books; he did not trouble himself about the rest. Just books. With books he was happy. (Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" 2)

So the first peculiarity that the reader gets to know about Dupin is his passion for books. In the following page the narrator-companion says that Dupin is a "lover of the night", and that he has "a special reasoning power [...], an unusual reasoning power. Using it gave him great pleasure" (Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" 39). That is the most significant of Dupin's traits. He also shows his determination and his strong conviction that truth will out, by stating "[...] A mystery it is, yes. But there must be an answer. Let us go to the house and see what we can see. There must be an answer. There must!" (Poe, "Murders in the Rue Morgue" 46). His reasoning capacities suggest that he should keep up with the investigation, because even "what did not seem possible must be proved to be possible" (Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" 52). Sometimes he uses his special power to trace his friend's thoughts, as though he could read his mind. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is made up of six parts. At the beginning of each there is a short summary of what has already happened previously. This is a clear sign of the fact that these short stories were originally serialized. Moreover, this detective story is quite different from the following crime fiction works: this is firstly due to the length — one should remember that Poe's detective story is no more than a short story. In addition to that, there are no suspects and Dupin does not carry out any interview. The plot

is rather straightforward, and does not try to befuddle the reader with any complicated red herring. On the other hand, there are some key aspects of the typical detective story, which have to be taken into account: detection, and death in unclear circumstances: two people have been killed. A sleuth intervenes, investigates and uncovers the truth, by means of attentive observation and deep thinking. Due to these characteristics “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” has to be placed at the beginning of crime fiction history.

In 1842 and 1844 respectively, Poe published “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” and “The Purloined Letter”. Both of them were serialized and appeared on newspapers. The first one is a considerably faithful account of a real murder, of which Edgar Allan Poe must have heard on the news. According to that time’s events, Mary Rogers was found dead in New Jersey, United States in 1841. Her murder’s mystery will remain unsolved. In a sort of fictional attempt to find the murderer, Poe draws inspiration from the facts but sets his story in Paris. His sleuth Auguste Dupin is involved and will once more shed light on the circumstances of death. On the other hand “The Purloined Letter” is another example of Dupin’s skills in “armchair detection”. Simply by listening to an officer’s account on the mysterious affair, he is able to reveal the hiding place of the stolen letter, which actually had been visible the whole time, just in a different form. Here Poe introduces the idea that sometimes one does not need to look in the strangest places to find something, and the most obvious place may be at the same time the least obvious. For the first time the author presents the character of the detective’s antagonist, in this circumstance Minister D-. Arthur Conan Doyle will make use of this narrative technique, as he will invent his famous Professor Moriarty, Holmes’s nemesis (Scaggs 21-22). Those are the only crime fiction stories which were written by the American author. Interestingly enough though, crime does not necessarily mean murder: with the exception of “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt”, the other two stories do not deal with murder at all. It was an animal that committed the ferocious crimes in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and the mystery in “The Purloined Letter”

obviously concerns the theft of a letter (Kayman 44). A fourth story, “The Gold Bug” (1843), cannot be dealt with as a crime fiction story in strict sense, because the reader is not provided with any clue until after the final solution (Haycraft 9). Herewith we start to come across rules which characterize crime novels. Some of Poe’s stories’ features have been so successful and brilliant, that they have become common praxis in later detective fiction. For instance, there is always a major detective, backed up by an average skilled companion, who acts as a foil to the investigating genius and most of the times narrates the tale; furthermore, police officers are never as clever as the sleuth. The village setting, the conventions of concealment in the most obvious place in disguised form, and of suspense until the solution’s surprise also come from Poe. He was also the first to introduce the so-called “confrontation scene”, in which the detective reunites all the suspects and explains what really happened (Maida and Spornick 37-38).

These staples may seem obvious to a 21st century crime novels reader, but the point is that 150 years ago they were not widespread at all. Someone had to invent those conventions from scratch and establish those rules, and Poe played such a paramount role in this sense, that Haycraft (12) argues that “nothing really primary has been added either to the framework of the detective story or to its internals since Poe completed his trilogy.”

1.5.2 Gaboriau and the Canonization of the Detective Character

After Poe, other writers have contributed in formulating the rules of the game. Émile Gaboriau (1832-1873) was on the literary scene mostly between 1860 and 1870. He started his career as feuilletonist. His *L’Affaire Lerouge* was published in 1866 and, according to Haycraft (32), it is “the first story of novel length to employ detection as an important theme.” *L’Affaire Lerouge* introduces the figure of Monsieur Lecoq, who will be Gaboriau’s main detective in the following noteworthy novels, such as *Le Crime d’Orcival*

(1866), *Le Dossier 113* (1867), *Les Esclaves de Paris* (1868) and *Monsieur Lecoq* (1869). Monsieur Lecoq is very similar to Dupin in the capacity to enter the criminal's mentality. But the two detectives also differ considerably from each other because Dupin tends to think something through, whereas Lecoq does not linger in deductive reasoning. He plunges himself into the investigation, follows clues and if they turn out to be irrelevant, he starts again (Ferrucci, Website). Lecoq has probably been sketched from a real criminal, who then turned up to help the police in their investigations. Vidocq - that is his name - published the *Mémoires* of his adventures in 1828 and is recalled even in Gaboriau's detective's name. This French crime writer plays an important role in bridging the works of the most famous Christie's predecessors, Poe and Doyle. The latter owns a great deal of fictional techniques to Gaboriau, for example the praxis to add the characters' histories in the middle of the investigation (Schütt 63). One of Lecoq's assets is to have a criminal mentality, which enables him to think like a murderer. In fact he could have easily been one of the greatest masterminds of crime.

1.5.3 Further Steps in the Development of Crime Fiction

William Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) is another important contributor to detective literature. His crime epistolary novel *The Moonstone* (1868), which was serialized in Dickens' newspaper, gave birth to Sergeant Cuff, who helped reinforce the central role of the detective character, together with Dupin and Lecoq. Though it is Collins' only crime novel, *The Moonstone* was also fundamental in the history of crime fiction, as it is considered the first crime novel in the history of literature. Furthermore, Collins changes the focus from the murder to the investigation (Priestman 4). Indeed the novel deals once again with theft, rather than with murder. Maida and Spornick (41) argue that Sergeant Cuff's method is indeed very meticulous and will be shared by some of Christie's future sleuths.

Gaston Leroux (1868-1927) also left his heritage the history of crime fiction. Already a writer, he published his first detective novel *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* in 1907. It is said to be a classical of the “locked-room” narrative strand, introduced by Poe. The concept’s name is self-explaining: the mystery is linked to a chamber locked from the inside and the main riddle is “how did the murderer do that?” That is to say, the *whodunit*, is in this case rather a *howdunit*. Leroux’s detective is the young investigative reporter Joseph Josephine, better known as Rouletabille, who appears in nine of Leroux’s detective stories. He relies very much on his logical skills. Only by using them he is able to solve the locked-room riddle. The introvert lawyer Sinclair helps him during the investigation and is also the narrator.

As unexpected as it may sound, two of the novels written by Charles Dickens (1812-1870) are listed among detective novels, namely *Bleak House* (1853) and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). They contain some important crime fiction elements, such as the “least-likely-person” plot and the confrontation drama, both of them echoes of Poe’s. Dickens’ contribution to the development of the genre was less considerable than the others’. His main detective, Inspector Bucket, stands rather for a policeman’s positive model, than for a brilliant sleuth as Dupin or Holmes (Scaggs 23). With reference to police and authorities Dickens goes against the tide, by adopting a positive attitude towards them. He also introduces the figure of the female assistant to the main male sleuth. (Maida and Spornick 40, 41).

1.5.4 The Most Famous Detective in Crime Fiction

All the authors that have been mentioned above have contributed to the establishment of the rules of the game. However, the most significant writer who influenced the development of crime fiction is Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930). Mostly thanks to him detective fiction has gained its popularity, his detective Sherlock Holmes has made the history of crime fiction. It seems so

absurd today that Doyle wanted to get rid of him: after two novels and two series he was not satisfied with him anymore and wrote his hero's death. The public rose with rage and indignation, readers started to cancel their subscription to the magazine of publication and as a consequence Doyle was forced to take a step back and bring Holmes back to life. Doyle's works with Holmes as protagonist include *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), *The Sign of the Four* (1890), *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892) and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894), *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1905), *The Valley of Fear* (1915), *His Last Bow* (1917), *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927). Most of them were first published serially on newspapers and magazines. Sherlock Holmes is arguably the most famous detective of all times. Every year a consistent number of tourists visit his fictional headquarter in 221-B Baker Street. Shaped after models such as Dupin and Lecoq, Holmes is also characterized by a strong personality and a predisposition for eccentricity. Logic and deductive inference are his most powerful weapons. However he is also able to melt quick thinking with a good deal of action and dynamism and a deep knowledge of chemistry and science in general. In *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), the first novel featuring Sherlock Holmes, his new friend and future investigation companion, Watson, is profoundly astonished by Holmes's skills. He even makes a list of them:

Sherlock Holmes—his limits.

1. Knowledge of Literature.—Nil.
2. Philosophy.—Nil.
3. Astronomy.—Nil.
4. Politics.—Feeble.
5. Botany.—Variable. Well up in belladonna, opium, and poisons generally. Knows nothing of practical gardening.
6. Geology.—Practical, but limited. Tells at a glance different soils from each other. After walks has shown me splashes upon his trousers, and told me by their colour and consistence in what part of London he had received them.
7. Chemistry.—Profound.
8. Anatomy.—Accurate, but unsystematic.
9. Sensational Literature.—Immense. He appears to know every detail of every

horror perpetrated in the century.

10. Plays the violin well.

11. Is an expert singlestick player, boxer, and swordsman.

12. Has a good practical knowledge of British law. (Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, n.p., chapter II)

As one may see from Watson's notes, Holmes is eclectic and versatile, as his interests cover a large variety of fields, from sports to law, from music to science. He makes indeed large use of scientific methods during his investigations. This may be a contributing factor to contemporary readers' curiosity about Holmes's books. Checking empirically whether his ideas are correct is of vital importance in his investigations. Otherwise, as Holmes himself says, one risks to take too much distance from reality and make things up, ending up adapting facts to theories, instead of theories to facts (Doyle, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, quoted in Truzzi 75). In order to form his theories Holmes even uses a good deal of imagination, because sometimes it can reflect reality (Doyle, *The Valley of Fear*, quoted in Truzzi 75). Nevertheless, imagining does not imply guessing. Holmes never guesses and that is why he needs facts as a counterproof for his theories. In *The Sign of the Four* Holmes enumerates the characteristics of the perfect detective: these are knowledge, capacity of observation, and capacity of deduction. As for knowledge, it comes with ageing. Observation is something which should not be taken for granted, since everybody can *see* but very few can *observe*. Even the tiniest detail, which seems to be irrelevant, can lead to important discoveries, that is why Holmes says "You know my method. It is founded upon the observation of trifles." (Doyle, "The Boscombe Valley Mystery" 1891). The importance of observation in Holmes's scientific method is also remarked in *A Study in Scarlet* during a conversation between Watson – to whom *I* here refers – and Holmes:

"But do you mean to say," I said, "that without leaving your room you can unravel some knot which other men can make nothing of, although they have

seen every detail for themselves?”

“Quite so. I have a kind of intuition that way. Now and again a case turns up which is a little more complex. Then I have to bustle about and see things with my own eyes. You see I have a lot of special knowledge which I apply to the problem, and which facilitates matters wonderfully. Those rules of deduction [...] are invaluable to me in practical work. Observation with me is second nature (*A Study in Scarlet* n.p., chapter II).

Another of Doyle’s brilliant intuitions was to make Holmes more human, so that the readers can identify with him more easily, if not deductively speaking, at least socially. Holmes is indeed extremely untied, he is a drug addict and suffers from depression from time to time (Maida and Spornick 45). Slightly too conscious of his abilities, he feels free to judge the other famous sleuths, namely Dupin and Lecoq. As Watson tells Holmes that he reminded him of Dupin, Holmes’s almost indignant reply is:

“No doubt you think that you are complimenting me in comparing me to Dupin,” he observed. “Now, in my opinion, Dupin was a very inferior fellow. That trick of his of breaking in on his friends’ thoughts with an apropos remark after a quarter of an hour’s silence is really very showy and superficial. He had some analytical genius, no doubt; but he was by no means such a phenomenon as Poe appeared to imagine.” (Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* n.p., chapter II)

The trick to whom Holmes refers appears in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”. In the first pages Dupin gives the impression of reading his companion’s thoughts, agreeing with a thought that the other had not said out loud. This is made possible because Dupin deductively follows his companion’s thoughts. With reference to Lecoq instead, Holmes does not think of him in much better terms:

“Lecoq was a miserable bungler,” he said, in an angry voice; “he had only one thing to recommend him, and that was his energy. That book made me positively ill. The question was how to identify an unknown prisoner. I could have done it in twenty-four hours. Lecoq took six months or so. It might be made a text-book for detectives to teach them what to avoid.” (Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* n.p., chapter II):

In this case the reference traces back to *Monsieur Lecoq* (1869), where the French detective has a rough time with a prisoner. Holmes's investigative method already emerges from this first novel in which the famous detective appears, that is *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). Holmes explains it in the last chapter:

"I hardly expected that you would [follow him in his thoughts]. Let me see if I can make it clearer. Most people, if you describe a train of events to them, will tell you what the result would be. They can put those events together in their minds, and argue from them that something will come to pass. There are few people, however, who, if you told them a result, would be able to evolve from their own inner consciousness what the steps were which led up to that result. This power is what I mean when I talk of reasoning backwards, or analytically." (Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, n.p., last chapter)

In *A Study in Scarlet* two helpless Scotland Yard police officers ask for Holmes's advice, because they are not able to figure out a murder. After a thorough observation of the crime scene, carried out both inside and outside the building, Holmes appears to already have a theory and a rough description of the killer. From the examination of footprints, of a German word written in blood on the wall and of a carriage's traces in the mud he infers that the murder is a tall and robust man, with long nails; he is a cab driver, smokes Trichinopoly cigars and had walked to and fro in the room with growing preoccupation. His theory is gradually proved by evidence. One cannot talk about the use of the least-likely-person theme; it would be rather the only-person theme in this case, as there are no other suspects, and, as a consequence, no final confrontation scene. The truth is unveiled in the last chapter, because Holmes explains it to Watson. But the murderer had already been caught, and this event came out of the blue at the end of the first part. Everything seems finalized at glorifying Holmes's deductive skills. He himself does not hesitate in self praise, as in the novel's final chapter "How well [his stratagem] succeeded, and how quickly I took advantage of it, are still fresh in your recollection." (Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* n.p., chapter VII); or "Surely my whole chain of reasoning cannot have been false. It is impossible!" (Doyle, *A*

Study in Scarlet n.p., chapter VII).

Doyle sticks to the tradition of foiling his sleuth by adding a normally skilled investigating fellow, who also acts as a 1st person reliable narrator. He is the link between the story and the readers and has the duty to provide them with every clue and to share his thoughts with them. Moreover, he has the collateral role of emphasizing the detective's genius and embodying the Victorian middle-class morality (Scaggs 25). Dr. Watson was such a successful figure, that the companion figure is called from now on *Watson-figure* par excellence. Doyle also introduced the antagonist character creating Professor Moriarty as Holmes's nemesis. This brilliant professor and mastermind of crime appears in only a few of the stories, and is killed by Sherlock in their final duel, in which Holmes himself was supposed to die.

1.5.5 The Golden Age

The years between the two World Wars were crime fiction's most flourishing period. These decades are known as the "Golden Age" of detective narrative. The Golden Age is mostly a British phenomenon, rather than American. It conventionally starts with the publication of Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), the first detective novel written by the soon-to-become "Queen of Crime". Most of the detective novels dating back to these years are clue-puzzles, also known as *whodunits* or *whodunnits* (Scaggs 35). The appeal of Golden Age detective fiction lies in its being similar to a Rubik's cube, a logical game the reader is challenged to solve. All the suspects are introduced and clues are provided for the reader, according to the *fair play* conventions. The focus being on unraveling the riddle, there is no much room for developing a thorough psychological complexity of the characters, which end up very often being rather types. Golden Age crime fiction has been also criticized because the characters embodied the upper-middle class racism and xenophobia, which were typical in intra-wars period society. As a matter of fact, war is not very present in the Golden Age clue-puzzles. According to Scaggs (48) "the physical

and social settings are so isolated from post-war depression that it is as if the Great War had never happened.” The most common settings were in fact houses and little, quiet villages, which seemed not to be touched by the horror of the war. Houses being a typical setting in Golden Age crime novels, the locked-room mystery touched its apex of popularity. *The Hollow Man* by John Dickinson Carr (1906-1977) is considered the masterpiece of this sub-genre of detective fiction, and was written in 1935. The overwhelming majority of this period’s detectives were amateur sleuths such as Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple. This way it was easier for the public to try and identify with them. There was no need to be a police officer in order to be able to solve a crime. Certainly Dame Agatha Christie was not the sole prominent writer of the Golden Age. Among them Gilbert K. Chesterton (1874-1936), inventor of Father Brown’s detective stories, Margery Allingham (1904-1966), Anthony Berkeley (1893-1971) are to be at least mentioned. But it is with Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957), who invented the figure of the well-known amateur sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey, that Agatha Christie will be particularly in touch. Both of them were members of the Detection Club, which held regular meetings in London starting from 1930. All its members had to take an oath of admission, in which they promised that they would adhere to the rules of fair play.

1.6 Detectives and Their Helpers

After Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s work, the principal character of the sleuth had come to possess standard features: the detective is in most cases a man, Miss Marple being the notable exception. He is an amateur, that is somebody who does not catch criminals as a job. Leroux’s Rouletabille is a journalist, Poirot is retired and Dupin plays detection as a hobby, for instance. As a “detached, gentlemanly amateur”, the classical detective has generally “little real personal interest in the crime he is investigating” (Cawelti 81); he rather acts for the sake of “delight in the game of analysis and action” (Cawelti 81). There is

usually only one detective and in order to make a credible character out of him, authors define him with name, surname and shape him according to some staples. Holmes's character, for instance, was so credible that letters addressed to *Mr. Sherlock Holmes* started to arrive at 221B Baker Street for real. Surely a genius, the detective is able to think outside the box, which enables him not to be blinded by biases. In this way he can shun red herrings and tell the important clues from the insignificant facts (Hühn 455). That is exactly what distinguishes him from the average reader and what allows him to accomplish his task, namely unraveling *whodunit*. Following Dupin's tradition, the detective usually suffers from idiosyncrasies, which make him eccentric. Sergeant Cuff's overmastering passion for roses, Poirot's obsession with order and symmetry and Holmes's addiction are only a few examples. The characterization of the sleuth as "armchair" detective was also very widespread and, as it has already been said, started from Poe's Dupin – no surprise at this point. In "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt", for instance, Dupin is able to come to the solution relying solely on newspapers accounts, without visiting the crime scene himself, thus ideally solving the mystery from his *armchair* (Lehman 64). The detective is also most likely to possess knowledge in the scientific domain, and is certainly a connoisseur of mankind and an acute observer. He may also be physically characterized: sometimes very tall, sometimes very short, either very thin or very fat and so on (Grella 36). Eventually, he obviously seems to be followed by crime.

With reference to the narrator, he usually is the detective's companion and helps him in the investigation. Hence, he is a character which "has an excuse for being close to the detective, but cannot follow or understand his line of investigation." (Cawelti 83). It was Poe who firstly used this gimmick. Nevertheless it is no coincidence that after Watson, he started to be commonly called "Watson-figure", from Arthur Conan Doyle's character. Cawelti perfectly explains the main reason for using this narrative technique:

By narrating the story from a point of view that sees the detective's actions but does not participate in his perceptions or process of reasoning, the writer can more easily misdirect the reader's attention and thereby keep him from prematurely solving the crime. If he uses the detective's point of view, the writer has troubles keeping the mystery a secret without creating unnatural and arbitrary limits of what is shown to us of the detective's reasoning process. (Cawelti 83)

Among the greatest investigators' companions, Dupin's companion's name is not stated, and Hastings (Poirot's main helper) made his disappearance after a few novels. Almost always a male character, his role is as important as the detective's, if not more. He is sometimes slightly stupid and therefore functions as a perfect buffer between the brilliant, idiosyncratic detective and the average reader. His task is to help the sleuth see the obvious which is hidden right in front of one's eyes. Furthermore, he registers what he sees and what the sleuth discovers, providing the reader with the necessary clues to solve the riddle. In other words, he shares his point of view upon the facts with the reader. Scaggs offers a complete definition of the term:

The first-person narrator in the detective story normally performs three functions: they act as a contrast to the abilities of the detective, emphasizing in the detective's genius a difference in degree, rather than a difference in kind; they act as recorders, not only of the story, but also of the physical data upon which the detective's analytic ability depends; and they embody the social and ideological norms of the period (Scaggs 21).

After a while, the figure of the narrator-helper disappears, and a third person external narrator becomes more and more frequent. In this way the reader's point of view is no longer limited to one of the characters', because they can follow everybody's thoughts and see what other characters are doing. In these cases detectives may choose other occasional helpers. For instance in *4.50 from Paddington* (1957), Agatha Christie chooses a shrewd cook and housekeeper as Miss Marple's occasional helper.

1.7 The Victim and the Murderer

With reference to the victims, Grella is convinced that only bad characters get to suffer, thus keeping up with his vision of detective novel as a comedy. Therefore, the victim must be someone strongly unpleasant; they must, in a way, deserve their death (Grella 41), either because they are simply troublesome, or because they have done something which interfered with the murderer's plans. This is particularly clear in Agatha Christie's novels *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) and *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), which will be analyzed in the following chapter. This trick serves in order not to regret the victim too much: there is no room for weeping and grieving over a dead body in a detective story. The novel must proceed in its way to the *dénouement*. Due to the typical setting, the victim usually belongs to the upper-middle class. He or she may be influential and wealthy and in some cases the victim's social status can be a red herring, because one may think that the motive for killing him or her is money, which then turned out to have nothing to do with it.

Concerning the murderers, they eliminate an undesirable person at the beginning of the story, thus breaking the laws and doing something unforgivable, which wins them condemnation. Sometimes they are given the chance to escape their fate by committing suicide, or dying for natural causes, as in *A Study in Scarlet*. They usually gain part of the readers' sympathy; in other words readers admire them in a certain way, as they are able to plan a homicide and almost get away with it, because if it was not for the detective, the local police would not be able to catch them in most cases. The sleuth is the only one who is shrewd enough not to be fooled by their tricks. As the killers are also destined to be doomed, they must be themselves, according to Grella, undesirable people (Grella 43). What is more, contrary to popular belief, butlers never did it. It would be too obvious and it would annihilate the typical ascending climax at the end of detective novels. Butlers and household are in general faithful, and they are the first characters which are erased from the

suspects' list. It would be instead more exciting for the reader to discover that an apparently vulnerable spinster or an upstanding vicar are the actual killer. In some detective stories, as in "The Purloined Letter", the culprit (in this case the thief) is known from the beginning, and the whole point of the novel is to unravel how he or she did it, or sometimes even to catch them. They may be introduced among a group of equally plausible suspects, but in any case the reader should be familiar with them, because it would be slightly annoying if the culprit turned out to be an unknown character or a stranger. In any case murderers end up being victims of their fate, because they can't get away with what they have done. In the end, as is often the case, they are condemned. The murderer becomes the victim, so that the natural order which had been subverted by crime is restored.

1.8 The "Rules of the Game"

By the Golden Age period, a sort of pattern, a scheme on how to write a detective novel had already been defined. There were rules to follow, and some authors felt the need to write them down in a proper list. In 1928 S. S. Van Dine published his essay "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories" (Scaggs 28). S. S. Van Dine is actually the pseudonym of Willard Huntington Wright (1887-1939), an American art critic and detective stories writer. He gave birth to the aesthete-sleuth Philo Vance. The following year Father Robert Knox (1888-1957), Catholic priest, essayist, translator and author of detective novels, published his "Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction" (1929).

Van Dine's rules will be briefly summed up as follows. He praises once more logical deduction as the only possible means to solve a crime. In addition to that, he expresses the need for fair play, that is to say, the writer must not try and deceive the reader by means of tricks such as "the detective turns out to be the culprit", "the reader does not have all the elements to solve the riddle by

himself”, or “the murder is finally revealed to be an accident or a suicide”, because their sole aim would be that of making a fool of the reader. There must be a detective, one and only, and the riddle must be solved exclusively and thoroughly through his or her reasoning power. Therefore coincidences must be eliminated and, in order to give the reader a chance, so do such things as mindreading, crystal gazing and messages from the spirits. The only crime which is worth of crime novels is murder. Van Dine’s rule n.7 clearly states that “There simply must be a corpse in a detective novel, and the deader the corpse the better. No lesser crime than murder will suffice. [...]” According to these canons though, Poe’s first detective stories would not be considered as detective stories at all, as the culprit in “The murders in the Rue Morgue” is no other than an animal, whereas in “The Purloined Letter” there is no corpse at all. Furthermore love affairs, character analysis, long descriptive passages and secret societies must be banished and, interestingly enough, there should be but one culprit, and this person must not be a professional criminal. Van Dine argues indeed, that the plot is more interesting if the murder is someone highly above suspicion like a charitable spinster. Eventually the motive for murder should be strictly personal. All these rules enable the climax to rise constantly until the solution is disclosed. The 20th rule in Van Dine’s list is made up of minor things that should be avoided in his opinion. Here they are:

And (to give my Credo an even score of items) I herewith list a few of the devices which no self-respecting detective story writer will now avail himself of. They have been employed too often, and are familiar to all true lovers of literary crime. To use them is a confession of the author’s ineptitude and lack of originality. (a) Determining the identity of the culprit by comparing the butt of a cigarette left at the scene of the crime with the brand smoked by a suspect. (b) The bogus spiritualistic se’ance to frighten the culprit into giving himself away. (c) Forged fingerprints. (d) The dummy-figure alibi. (e) The dog that does not bark and thereby reveals the fact that the intruder is familiar. (f) The final pinning of the crime on a twin, or a relative who looks exactly like the suspected, but innocent, person. (g) The hypodermic syringe and the knockout drops. (h) The commission of the murder in a locked room after the police have actually broken in. (i) The word association test for guilt. (j) The cipher, or code letter, which is eventually unraveled by the sleuth. (Van Dine, n.p.)

This list of things to be avoided is interesting because it shows how detective fiction develops in time. If at the beginning of the crime fiction era, writers could have proved one's culpability through a cigarette butt, this trick was not allowed anymore after the Golden Age. Writers should take into account that readers become more and more expert of crime fiction, and there is no more disappointing thing than spoiling the pleasure of reading a detective story by using a trick which is already familiar to the reader. Arthur Conan Doyle provides us with an example, taken from "Silver Blaze", one of the short stories in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894).

Gregory (Scotland Yard detective): "Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

Holmes: "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

Gregory: "The dog did nothing in the night-time."

Holmes: "That was the curious incident. (Doyle, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, n.p., Adventure I: "Silver Blaze")

In the period between the publications of Doyle's book and Van Dine's rules, the reader must have got accustomed to the dog-did-not-bark trick. Indeed that is exactly rule n. 20(e) in Van Dine's list.

Knox's Decalogue of detective fiction lists the following rules:

1. The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.
2. All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
3. Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.
4. No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.
5. No Chinaman must figure in the story.

6. No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.
7. The detective must not himself commit the crime.
8. The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader.
9. The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.
10. Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.

Given that I personally see no reason for rule n. 5, Knox takes the so-called “Watson figure” in consideration and describes some of its features. From this also we can understand how influencing Doyle’s contribution to the history of crime fiction was.

As one can easily see, both Van Dine and Knox believe that fair play towards the readers be fundamental in order to make them feel involved in the investigation, and capable of figuring out the mystery. In order to do that, it is paramount that they should be provided with all the clues they need. And in case they read the book a second time – theoretically speaking, because it would make no sense at all with reference to a detective novel –, they should be able to trace them up all before the last chapter. Rules n. 4 and n. 10 account for the climax rising too: if the key to a tangled conundrum ends up being such an obvious trick as twin brothers or secret passages, readers are probably going to be very disappointed.

In addition to these rules, Haycraft inserts a chapter at the end of his handbook *Murder for Pleasure* (1941), in which he gives advice to those who would like to write a detective novel, thus pinpointing his personal *Rules of the Game* (this is by no coincidence his chapter’s name). Overall Haycraft agrees with the principles stapled by Van Dine and Knox. He adds that “False clues

are automatically forbidden” (226); it is true that one should take into account that red herrings, and therefore false clues, are very common in crime stories. Nevertheless they always fit in the bigger picture of the detection, namely they always have an explanation, which should be provided by the final chapter. Haycraft also states that “The less exotic the scenes, the better they will serve the essential interest of verisimilitude” (242). That serves to keep the readers’ focus on the investigation rather than on the scene, and also accounts for the search for verisimilitude, which is in any case present, even though readers are well conscious that crime fiction is very different from reality. According to Haycraft the writer should avoid to use coincidences (236). This rule may be clarified by saying that coincidences are indeed allowed in detective fiction, but there is always a rational explanation of why they have been inserted in the plot, just like false clues. Like Van Dine, he feels that things that have been overused should be avoided.

When Van Dine’s and Knox’s rules were published, Agatha Christie had already started revolutionizing the world of crime fiction. The next chapter focuses entirely on the *Queen of Crime* and her most influential and groundbreaking detective novels.

2. Agatha Christie: Breaking the Rules

Agatha Christie has been one of the most influential personalities of the 20th century. Not only did she write detective novels, she also adapted some of them into plays, wrote short stories collections, theatrical *pièces*, radio plays and sentimental novels, these latter under the pseudonym of Mary Westmacott, for a total amount of more than a hundred works. She is indeed one of the most prolific authors of British literature, partly thanks to her long life. Her play *The Mousetrap* (1952) has been awarded the Guinness World Record for the longest play run. Moreover, she is the second most printed British writer after Shakespeare and her works have been translated into more than a hundred languages, which make her the most translated British author of all times. She chose to enjoy all this success in the intimacy of her home and family, accordingly to her introvert nature. She gave no lectures, she turned down public invitations and she did not participate in public debates. Those who have had the privilege to interview her are very few. To them and in her *Autobiography* she always showed a tendency to understatement with reference to herself and to her success, which - she often said - was due to sheer luck. She was convinced that authors should remain “background, shadowy figures”. Often she gave the impression of underestimating her career and her abilities to the point that once she even defined herself “a perfect sausage machine”, referring to her intensive book production (Ramsey 30). In her *Autobiography* (1977), for instance, she writes:

I don't think [...] that I considered myself a bona fide author. I wrote things – yes – books and stories. They were published and I was beginning to accustom myself to the fact that I could count upon them as a definite source of income. But never, when I was filling in a form and came to the line asking for Occupation, would it have occurred to me to fill it in with anything but the time-honoured “Married woman”. I was a married woman, that was my status, and *that* was my occupation. As a sideline, I wrote books. I never approached my

writing dubbing it with the grand name of “career”. I would have thought it ridiculous. (*Autobiography* 445)

Nonetheless, although her books have been written in a period of time which runs between a century and almost fifty years ago, they are by no means obsolete or outdated; instead, they are constantly being printed and turned into movies.

2.1 A brief outline of Agatha’s life

Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller was born in Torquay on September 15th 1890. Her childhood in Ashfield, her family’s property, was characterized by the presence of strong female figures: her father, the American Frederick Alvah Miller, died when Agatha was very young, therefore she was raised by her grandmother and her mother Clara Boehmer, a well-educated woman. The second of three children, Agatha was not sent to public school. She was educated in the carefree and cultivated context of her home. Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Arthur Conan Doyle were her childhood companions (Ercoli 7) and would influence her future writing. In this bracing background Agatha grew a fervent imagination. However she does not describe herself as a sharp child. In her *Autobiography* (107) she writes “I was dull as a child”, and she reports her relatives’ words (106) “Oh Agatha, you really are hopeless, you never notice anything”. As a grown-up young woman, she worked in a dispensary and in wartime she served as a nurse. Thanks to that she had the opportunity to get familiar with all kinds of poisons and drugs.

In 1914 Agatha married Archibald Christie, a colonel in the British Royal Flying Corps. The couple had a daughter, Rosalind, in 1919. 1926 was her life’s turn of the tide: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was published; her mother, who had remained one of the capital figures in her life, died and Archie asked for divorce. As a consequence, Agatha suffered a dramatic depression,

which culminated in the mystery of her disappearance: for a week she was nowhere to be found. Then an anonymous tip brought the police to the hotel where she had registered with Archie's mistress name. Doctors said she was confused and suffered from amnesia; scandalmongers instead maintained that the episode was planned in order to make book sales soar, as a consequence of all the fuss and advertisement (Ercoli 14-15). Once recovered and divorced from Archie, she decided to travel to the Middle East. In Mesopotamia she met the archeologist Max Mallowan, whom she married in 1930. She spent most of her time enthusiastically following her husband's archeological expeditions and this clearly influenced her literary production. Agatha spent the rest of her long life with her husband, her daughter and her grandson Matthew. In 1971 her prominent literary career gained her the title of Dame of British Empire. She died in January 1976, at the age of 85.

2.2 A creative genius

It is thus clear that the female members of her family played an important role in her childhood and, as a consequence, in her literary career as well. The most influencing character in Agatha's life was her mother, to whom she was strongly bound. She was her companion and tutor; she always read for her daughter and then encouraged her to write (Maida and Spornick 12). As again Maida and Spornick (13) pinpoint, in Agatha Christie's crime stories it never occurs that a mother kills her daughter or vice versa. On the contrary, there are instances in which fathers are murdered by their sons and the other way around. With these premises, it is understandable that her death threw Agatha in a state of profound depression. Her Grannie was also important for her as a model, because in a way she inspired the character of Miss Marple.

It was her sister Madge who introduced her to Arthur Conan Doyle's detective novels; it was again her sister, who challenged Agatha to write her first crime novel. "I bet you can't write a detective story", she said (Maida and

Spornick 11), not knowing how wrong she would prove. Agatha starts to fancy the idea.

It was while I was working in the dispensary that I first conceived the idea of writing a detective story. The idea had remained in my mind since Madge's earlier challenge – and my present work seemed to offer a favourable opportunity. [...] I began considering what kind of detective story I could write. Since I was surrounded by poisons, perhaps it was natural that death by poisoning should be the method I selected. I settled on one fact which seemed to me to have possibilities. I toyed with the idea, liked it, and finally accepted it. Then I went to the *dramatis personae*. Who should be poisoned? Who would poison him or her? When? Where? How? Why? And all the rest of it. [...] There would naturally have to be a detective. At that date I was well steeped in the Sherlock Holmes tradition. So I considered detectives. Not like Sherlock Holmes, of course: I must invent one of my own, and he would also have a friend as a kind of butt or stooge – that would not be difficult (*Autobiography* 261).

This passage is particularly significant because it deals with the beginning of Agatha's career and the conception of one of the world's most famous detectives, Hercule Poirot, a Belgian sleuth characterized by his egg-shaped head, a marvelous pair of moustaches and a passion for order and symmetry. The output is *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Christie's first detective novel. As a matter of fact, it did not experience a great success at the beginning. More than one editor refused the book, before it was eventually published in 1920. It was the beginning of a literary era. The contract she signed for the publication of her first work bound her to write other books.

A name overheard while drinking tea was the starting point of her second story, *The Secret Adversary* (1922), this time more a spy thriller than a detective story. It features two of her minor characters, Tommy and Tuppence, a couple of amateur detectives. But the detective of the first story was far more successful than them, and editor and press urged for another Poirot story. *Murder on the Links* came out in 1923. Henceforth Agatha Christie would be stuck with this idiosyncratic, order-obsessed sleuth. In her first novels Agatha Christie followed Conan Doyle's tradition, foiling Poirot with Captain

Hastings, who plays the Watson-figure, but then she became fed up with Hastings and got rid of him. It was not until *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) that her career reached its peak. In 1928 Poirot was staged for the first time, as *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was adapted to a theatre play, with the name *Alibi* (Sanders and Lovallo 37).

The first Miss Marple novel, *Murder at the Vicarage*, was published in 1930. The shrewd spinster was destined to become one of the most famous female sleuths of all times. Agatha was by then a well-affirmed writer. In her *Autobiography* (426) she writes “I was gaining confidence over my writing now. I felt that I would have no difficulties in producing a book every year, and possibly a few short stories as well.” On the other hand she also writes that she has actually never thought of herself as a full-time writer: “Yes, but then of course, I am not really an author” (*Autobiography* 445), she used to say, because, according to her, she has always written for “entertainment”. From this idea of Christie’s, one can understand her tendency – which I have already mentioned - to underestimate her literary activity as a crime novelist, which was actually a serious business instead. The same year (1930) saw the publication of the first of her romances, *Giant’s Bread*, which came out under the pseudonym of Mary Westmacott. The last would be *The Burden* (1965). She wrote six of them, but it looks as though she was not so talented in sentimental novels as she was in detective fiction, because the Mary Westmacott texts did not match Agatha Christie’s successful name in crime novels.

Her travels inspired her following novels. A journey across two continents gave her the brilliant idea of conceiving a murder on the same train she took, and in 1934 she produced another masterpiece of her collection, *Murder on the Orient Express*. The next Christie production was the result of her life in the Middle East. In these years *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), *Poirot on the Nile* (1937), *Appointment with Death* (1938) and *Death Comes as the End* (1945) came out, all of them set in the Middle East. In the meanwhile, in 1939, she wrote one of her most famous and mind-blowing novels, *Ten Little*

Niggers. It is the first novel she adapted into a play herself. In her *Autobiography* (489) she confesses her being sometimes disappointed because great changes had to be made in order to adapt the novel for the theatre. The point is that sometimes she did not like the way these changes were made; therefore she decided to work on the text. Even though she had already written *Black Coffee* for the theatre in 1930, it is from this point onwards that she becomes a playwright. Among her most famous works which were originally composed as *pièces* are *Spider's Web* (1954) and *The Unexpected Guest* (1958).

By that time she was so appreciated, that Queen Mary herself requested that she wrote a radio play for her eightieth birthday celebrations. As a consequence, in 1947 the BBC broadcast *Three Blind Mice*, later adapted to a full-length theatrical *pièce*, as *The Mousetrap*. It has been running since 1952, and this makes of this work the longest play ever run. When asked about the reasons of *The Mousetrap*'s success, she said "Apart from replying with the obvious answer 'Luck' – because it is luck, 90% luck, at least I should say – the only reason I can give is that there is a bit of something in it for almost everybody" (*Autobiography* 528). The rest of her literary career was no surprise. Among other noteworthy novels are *The A.B.C. Murders* (1936), *Cards on the Table* (1936), *The Body in the Library* (1942), *4:50 from Paddington* (1957), *A Murder is Announced* (1950), *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (1962), *Elephants Can Remember* (1972). All of them feature either Poirot or Miss Marple, which remained her most faithful companions for the rest of her life. Agatha Christie said farewell to them respectively with *Curtain* (1975) and *Sleeping Murder* (1976). The latter was published some months after Christie's death.

In the first chapter I have outlined the rules and conventions of crime fiction genre. I will now try and explain how Agatha Christie takes distance from these schemes set by previous detective fiction, thus creating something original. She does so particularly in the novels which then, by no coincidence, proved to be her most famous ones: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, *Murder on*

the Orient Express, And Then There Were None and *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*.

2.3 The Role of the Narrator in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd (1926) is one of the most unconventional detective stories ever written. It is not a coincidence that this book brought the to-be Dame of Crime at the apex of her success, as it surely is Agatha Christie's most controversial novel. After its publication it aroused scandal among those who believed in an orthodox type of crime fiction, in other words a crime fiction which followed the established rules. I am referring to the generally recognized rules of fair play - according to which readers should be provided with all the elements to try and get to the solution (see Priestman 79) - and to a traditional crime fiction based on scrutinizing footprints and cigar ashes (see Wells, chapters X and XI on Dupin's, Lecoq's and Holmes's methods).

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd's reviews were conflicting, and some of them not enthusiastic at all. The *Daily Sketch* complained that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was "[t]asteless, unforgivable letdown by an author we had grown to admire." The *New York Times* - July 7, 1926 - wrote "There are doubtless many detective stories more exciting and bloodcurdling than *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, but this reviewer has recently read very few which provide greater analytical stimulation" (in Sanders and Lovallo 35).

The novel features Christie's great detective, Hercule Poirot. After a career in the Police, he moved to the little village of King's Abbot to grow marrows. Christie begins to show her abilities in depicting the little village and its quiet life, in which the most interesting activity is apparently only gossip and whose peace is abruptly shattered by a murder. The village will be indeed one of the most typical settings of Agatha Christie's later novels, specifically of the Miss Marples. The village doctor plays this time the Watson/Hastings role. In inserting a sidekick for Poirot, Agatha shows to stick to the tradition set by

Poe and Conan Doyle. Poirot's companion and helper's name is Dr. Sheppard, he is fond of mechanics and detective stories and is also Poirot's neighbor. His sister Caroline is the most gossipy person in the whole village, and one of Agatha Christie's favorite characters. With reference to the plot, Mrs Ferrars dies due to an overdose of veronal. All evidence point to suicide, until her fiancé, Roger Ackroyd, is stabbed to death. At this point Roger's niece asks Poirot to investigate. There is a reasonable number of suspects, all of whom seem to be concealing something, starting from Roger's niece herself. Then there is the victim's old friend, son of his first marriage, the laid-back secretary and so on. The characters are typified, accordingly to Grella's opinion about the comparison between detective stories and comedy of manners (see chapter 1, page 13). During the investigation, Poirot makes excellent use of his "little grey cells"², which will lead him to solve the riddle. So far so ordinary. But here comes the brilliant and ingenious solution: Poirot proves that the murderer is none less than his assistant, and the tale's narrator, Dr. Sheppard. This solution is thoroughly groundbreaking and rewrites the history of crime fiction. It strikes readers and leaves them completely astonished, as they do not expect the narrator and sleuth sidekick to be the murderer, because it has never been so in detective fiction history. They simply unconsciously assume that the innocence of the narrator is taken for granted. By using an unreliable narrator, she breaks the alliance between the narrator and the readers (Ascari 171). This is exactly the reason why contemporary detective novelists and experts in the field accused Agatha Christie of cheating. They claimed that she did not play fair with the readers, and that she wrote the novel in that way, in order to mock them. A scandal must have broken out in the Club of Detection as well – of which Agatha was a prominent member –, for one of the Club's most firm principles was to follow the rules of fair play. This convention was shared by the major writers and theorists of that time, such as Sayers, Freeman, Wells (all

² This expression is so frequently used in Christie's books, that it has become one of Poirot's bywords.

quoted by Dove 68-69). In fact, she broke at least two of Knox's Decalogue rules with this trick – to be fair, one should not forget that Knox wrote his Ten Commandments in 1929, that is three years after the publication of this novel. As stated above, rule number one states “The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.” Dr. Sheppard would perfectly suit the first part of the rule, as he is one of the first characters introduced in the plot. But his being the narrator clashes with the second part. The story is told by Sheppard using a 1st person narration. The reader sees and knows the facts from Dr. Sheppard's point of view; it is Dr. Sheppard who chooses what the reader gets to know and what has to be concealed. In fact, in the final letter he wrote as a confession, Dr. Sheppard praises his abilities as a writer and narrator. In his last lines he states “I am rather pleased with myself as a writer” (*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* 220), because he is conscious that he has fooled the readers, with whom he, as a narrator, was supposed to establish a relation of empathy. That is exactly what Christie's opponents considered unfair.

Rule number nine of Knox's Ten Commandments is far more explicit. It states that “The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly below that of the average reader” (Knox quoted by Dove 69). In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* Agatha Christie willfully chooses to go against this tradition. To begin with, Dr. Sheppard is anything but stupid. His criminal mind elaborates a well-structured and ingenious plan in order to get away with his murder. He could have well mocked the readers, but made a single fatal mistake. He is so self-conscious and arrogant to bring the detection game beyond the red line, and think that he could mock Hercule Poirot as well. He even started to write down his impressions on the case, and Poirot considered them “meticulous and accurate”, though incomplete. They were, in fact, not as personal as Hastings' usual accounts, and this was a contributing factor which

convinced Poirot of Sheppard's guilt (Render 13). Dr. Sheppard clearly conceals something from the readers, and this clashes with the above rule.

Ramirez Ortega argues that Sheppard's most powerful weapon to deceive the readers is language. The doctor indeed carefully chooses his words, so that nothing he says is false, but his statements can always be interpreted ambiguously, that is from the point of view of the narrator, but also from the murderer's perspective (Ramirez Ortega 33). An example can be traced in chapter 5: Ackroyd's body has just been discovered and the doctor is called to examine it. In his account he says "I did what little had to be done" (*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* 43). Readers instinctively assume that the doctor accomplished his duty of examining the corpse; at the end of the book, instead, they learn that that sentence actually meant something similar to "I arranged the last red herrings in order to mislead the investigation."

One may take the side of Christie's opponents and argue that this is pure deception, because readers are not allowed to get to the solution on their own. And this would collide also with Van Dine's first two of his "Twenty rules for writing detective stories", these being:

1. The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated and described.
2. No willful tricks or deceptions may be placed on the reader other than those played legitimately by the criminal on the detective himself. (Van Dine n.p.)

On the other hand, Dorothy Sayers took Agatha's side, maintaining that "All the necessary data are given. The reader ought to be able to guess the criminal, if he is sharp enough, and nobody can ask for more than this. It is, after all, the readers' job to keep his wits about him, and, like the perfect detective, to suspect *everybody*" (Sayers quoted by Singer 167). Indeed the narrator's position enables Sheppard to become invisible to the readers' eye, even though he remains on the narration's and the investigation's foreground. Furthermore,

Agatha Christie played quite a fair game, as a matter of fact, because Sheppard's narration is always rational, and accounts for the truth only. He just fails to mention the parts concerning him being the murderer. Ramirez Ortega reports a perfect example of one of these failures, or ellipses – as he calls them –, taken once more from the novel's fifth chapter: "Ackroyd was sitting as I had left him in the armchair before the fire. His head had fallen sideways, and clearly visible, just below the collar of his coat, was a shining piece of twisted metalwork." (*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* 43). What Dr. Sheppard fails to mention is that when he left Ackroyd in that position, his victim was already a corpse (Ramirez Ortega 40).

In her *Autobiography* Agatha tries to defend herself from the accusation of not having played fair:

[...] a lot of people say that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is cheating; but if they read it carefully they will see that they are wrong. Such little lapses of time as there have to be are nicely concealed in an ambiguous sentence, and Dr. Sheppard, in writing it down, took great pleasure himself in writing nothing but the truth, though not the whole truth (*Autobiography* 352-353)

These omissions are the "details which produce a false picture" (Maida and Spornick 80). In this picture Sheppard and Poirot play for the same team, and Roger's first marriage son seems to be responsible for the crime. Nevertheless Poirot knows better and, basing his deductions more on the characters' psychology than on evidence found, understands that Sheppard is only pretending to help him. In fact he is trying to fool him in the same way he was fooling the reader, who, differently from Poirot, does not realize that no one is beyond suspicion. Agatha Christie here makes perfect use of the least-likely-suspect plot. In this case, the least-likeness derives from the murderer being "a member of the investigating team" (Xu 135). In fact Xu argues that it would not be very accurate to describe this as the least-likely-suspect plot, but rather as "the never-suspected-person" plot (Xu 134).

With reference to Hühn's theory of double narrativity, according to which detective novels are the output of two different stories (see chapter 1, page 12), *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is once again peculiar; Dr. Sheppard plays a double role: the narrator of one story but also the murderer, that is the author, of the other. As Hühn points out "the criminal tells the second story to prove the unreadability of the first" (459). By acting as its narrator, he tries to control the second story, which is the one told to the reader, in order to avoid that the truth about the first story comes out (459). But in the end it does come out, and it is so unexpected because readers have learnt to trust their narrator. Indeed Christie was shrewd enough to adopt some tricks which have as a subtle consequence that the readers' faith towards the narrator increases. First of all, Sheppard is a doctor, and generally doctors are always well esteemed and trusted. Moreover Christie draws a parallel between Sheppard and the narrator par excellence, Watson, himself also a doctor: she makes Sheppard say "I played Watson to his Sherlock" (*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* 124). Every crime fiction reader is familiar with Watson's role, everyone knows he is a good, trustworthy and reliable character; therefore the reader is influenced and automatically does not include the narrator in the list of suspects (Ksiezopolska 34). This accounts for Agatha's tendency to make of Dr. Sheppard more a type than a single character, that is the narrator-type, in order to trick the readers. Christie also tries to convince them that Dr. Sheppard is the perfect substitute for Hastings, Poirot's long-lasting companion: "You must have indeed been sent from the good God to replace my friend Hastings. [...] I observe that you do not quit my side. [...] shall we investigate that summer-house?" (*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* 81). Another instance occurs when Dr. Sheppard says: "To begin with, one must look at the thing logically", and at this point Poirot cuts him off and answers "Just what my poor Hastings used to say!" (*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* 122). These are extremely subtle and successful tricks, which send the readers on a completely wrong path. As also Ksiezopolska (34) states,

The doctor himself is very eager to appear as the substitute Hastings—most likely to mislead both Poirot and the reader. In fact, Dr. Sheppard intentionally overstates the Watsonian qualities that were already exaggerated in Captain Hastings (self-congratulatory tone, literary aspirations, foolish investment schemes, and so forth). But if he is imitating Hastings, the profession bestowed on him by his author brings him even closer to Conan Doyle's narrator. The parody becomes not only evident but also deliberate. (Ksiezopolska 34)

However, there is an important difference between Sheppard and Hastings – apart from the former being a murderer -, which concerns their writing styles: Sheppard had to conceal his identity as a murderer; therefore his narrative is “factual and impersonal”, in contrast with Hastings' transparent and involved writing (Render 35). Hastings tells his stories in the past tense, when the truth has already been disclosed; in Sheppard's case, all the chapters but the last are written in the past tense. The last chapter is a sort of confession, written by the guilty doctor, who ties up the last loose ends. From this chapter it emerges that Dr. Sheppard finds a way to escape his fate. After having sent the letter to Poirot, he kills himself with a lethal drug dose. The reader learns that the doctor was not only a murderer, but also a blackmailer. He knew that Mrs Ferrars had killed her husband and he blackmailed her. The issue rose when she told Roger Ackroyd, before dying. The fact of Sheppard's being a murderer and blackmailer makes him a perfect character to eliminate, according to Grella's analysis, in which bad characters, or “social evils” as Grella calls them, are suitable to be expelled (Grella 42-43).

Chesterton's statement that a reader enjoys a detective story only when he or she feels a fool, is particularly effective with reference to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Agatha Christie shows her ability to take her readers completely off guard, which is exactly what they are looking for, when they choose to read a detective novel.

2.4 Everyone or no one? *Murder on the Orient Express* and its Ambiguous Solutions

Murder on the Orient Express is one of the most tremendously popular Christie novels, partly because it has been turned into many successful movies. The last came out in 2017, 83 years after the novel's publication, and stars prominent contemporary actors. This certifies the status of *Murder on the Orient Express* as a masterpiece in the crime fiction genre. The novel was published in 1934, and appeared in the United States the same year with the title *Murder on the Calais Coach* (see Ercoli 88). The Orient Express had always fascinated Agatha in a certain way. In her *Autobiography* she writes "The Orient Express? All my life I had wanted to go on the Orient Express. When I had travelled to France or Spain or Italy, the Orient Express had often been standing at Calais, and I had longed to climb up into it" (*Autobiography* 372). The occasion rose when she decided to make a trip on her own to the East, from Calais to Stamboul the whole way through on the Orient Express – as I have previously written in this chapter (see page 43). It was in a hotel room in Stamboul that she conceived her masterpiece in 1933. According to Sanders and Lovallo (104), Christie took inspiration from a real tragic event, the Lindbergh case, which was popular in the news at that time. In 1932 a rich baby was kidnapped in the United States; although the ransom was paid, the baby's corpse was found two months later. Sanders and Lovallo quote *The Times Literary Supplement* review on Christie's novel. In their January 11, 1934 edition the unnamed journalist wrote "Need it be said – the little grey cells solve once more the seemingly insoluble. Mrs Christie makes an improbable tale very real, and keeps her readers enthralled and guessing to the end" (Sanders and Lovallo 107).

In *Murder on the Orient Express* Poirot joins fourteen strangers in the surprisingly crowded Calais Coach. As a consequence of a heavy snowfall, the train remains stuck in Yugoslavia for a few days. By means of the snowfall, Christie freezes time and space, thus transposing the murder in a sort of parallel, suspended dimension in which time never runs out until the solution is

revealed. This makes this novel different from the traditional race against time in order to catch the murderer before it is too late (Ewers 104). Madoeuf shares Ewers' point of view; she maintains that "[t]he train envelops the passengers/characters, detaching them from the outside world, its torments and storms; the train is the only place, an absolute, a world in itself" (Madoeuf 7). Only after having discovered the truth, time can start flowing again and the train can resume his journey.

One of the passengers, Edward Ratchett, is found dead, stabbed twelve times in his compartment locked from the inside. A remarkable number of pieces of evidence is found on the scene, each connected to a different passenger. Different people seem to have left traces behind. One of the first remarks which soon strike Poirot is that there are far too many clues. In fact, Christie here makes use of the "too much information blocking element; blocking elements are devices the author uses in order to prevent the readers from guessing the solution. In this case, Christie places many false clues in order to mislead not only the detective's investigation, but also the readers' deductions. Other blocking elements are, according to Singer, "too little information", "contradiction" and "false gestalt" – that is "the instantaneous recognition of a solution, usually an obscene one, which turns out to be false" (Singer 164). Contradiction is in fact present also in *Murder on the Orient Express*; this blocking element usually includes indeed tricks such as locked rooms (as the victim's room in this case), together with "falsified time of death, letters from the already dead" and so on (Singer 162).

As for the plot, the murderer or one of the accomplices enters Poirot's compartment and leaves a scarlet kimono in Poirot's suitcase, this way including him in the game, and challenging him in a certain way. Poirot finds himself involved in a brilliant locked-room mystery and starts investigating. Soon enough the Belgian detective discovers the victim's real identity. He did so with a little help of science, which is not actually Poirot's most used investigative method. This is something that differentiates the Belgian sleuth

from the previous traditional detectives, above all from Sherlock Holmes, himself a great chemistry expert, who is always examining meticulously the crime scenes in search of the tiniest piece of evidence. This traditional detectives' tendency to acute observation is Wells' main point in the eleventh chapter of her *The Technique of the Mystery Story* (1913). She argues that

Dupin is often described as scrutinizing with great minuteness of attention everything in the vicinity of the scene of the crime. [...] Lecoq pursues the same methods of close scrutiny, [...] As to Sherlock Holmes, it is not necessary to refer to his microscopic examinations. In fact, so addicted is he to the use of the lens, that it has become a by-word in connection with his methods (*The Technique of the Mystery Story*, n.p., chapter XI).

On the other hand, Poirot has a completely different method, which is particularly evident in novels such as *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Cards on the Table* – this latter will be analyzed in the following chapter. Poirot prefers relying on a character's psychological nature and has great confidence in his "little grey cells". Christie explained this method in *The Murder on the Links* (1923):

"Order" and "Method" were his gods. He had a certain disdain for tangible evidence, such as footprints and cigarette ash, and would maintain that, taken by themselves, they would never enable a detective to solve a problem. Then he would tap his egg-shaped head with absurd complacency, and remark with great satisfaction: "The true work, it is done from *within*. *The little grey cells*—remember always the little grey cells, *mon ami!*" (*Murder on the Links*, n.p. chapter 2)

Murder on the Orient Express is in fact one of the rare instances in which Poirot makes use of a chemical trick in order to discover the victim's identity. He discovers that the victim was himself the ruthless kidnapper and murderer of an innocent child, Daisy Armstrong, whose family fell apart after the event. Her mother died of grief, and her father consequently killed himself. Every passenger who slept in that wagon becomes a suspect, but they all happen to have an alibi confirmed by someone else in the coach. This circumstance will

become particularly interesting when Poirot starts to guess that the passengers are actually very far from being total strangers, who found themselves randomly on the same train. Poirot interviews them all. After a thorough analysis of the characters' psychology, and using no more than his little grey cells, the Belgian sleuth starts to draw connections between the passengers and the Armstrong case. He finds out that everyone in that wagon was in a way tied to the Armstrong family, being for instance the child's grandmother, the house cook, the chauffeur, the baby's mother's godmother and so forth, and he arrives to this bigger picture merely by guessing. In the end, Poirot gathers all the characters together and displays the final confrontation scene, in which he proposes two solutions. Either no one is guilty – in this case a stranger got on during one of the train's stops, killed the man and then got off during the following one – or everybody is. The genius of Agatha Christie in this case is to come up with this latter staggering solution to the riddle. In fact all the apparent strangers who traveled in the same coach actually had something in common, that is the connection to the Armstrong family, and they had planned not only to kill Ratchett, but to put him to "trial". Indeed, Ratchett was able to get away with what he did, thanks to his money and influence.

The theme of the culprit who escapes justice and therefore needs to be punished is recurrent in other Agatha Christie's novels, such as *And Then There Were None*. In *Murder on the Orient Express* the twelve passengers become the twelve jury members who condemn the kidnapper-murderer to death: "The impossible could not have happened, therefore the impossible must be possible in spite of appearances" (*Murder on the Orient Express* 155) says Poirot, who is able to unravel this entangled conundrum. He discloses the solution in one of his typical confrontation scenes. After interviewing the suspects, he gathers them in a room and starts explaining the dénouement. The tale is something between a soliloquy and a dialog, which lasts for pages and is never cut off by external interventions. Poirot usually shows that he enjoys this theatrical role as the protagonist and truth-teller (Schwanebeck 50). He is indeed quite boastful

and adores leaving his public in a sort of suspense and then taking the scene for him as he starts telling the incredulous listeners – and readers – the truth, which he was able to guess.

As the Belgian sleuth explains, the victim was stabbed twelve times, each time with different strengths and angles, because in fact twelve different people had stabbed him. These circumstances completely collide with the 12th rule of Van Dine's, according to which "There must be but one culprit, no matter how many murders are committed. The culprit may, of course, have a minor helper or co-plotter; but the entire onus must rest on one pair of shoulders: the entire indignation of the reader must be permitted to concentrate on a single black nature." The idea of going against this rule has turned out to be one of the most mind-blowing for Christie. The readers' expectations are totally overcome because the readers unconsciously expect that the dénouement follows the one-culprit tradition, formulated in Van Dine's rule; they know that there will be one murderer because there has always been one murderer, and they try to guess which passenger is more likely to have committed the crime. The Dame of Crime lets them speculate: will it be the colonel? Or maybe the victim's secretary? Perhaps he hoped to inherit a pretty sum... sure it cannot be the old lady, she would not have had enough strength to stab him... and then Agatha Christie fools her readers, for actually everybody did it! The other pieces of evidence found in the room were not more than red herrings, which were positioned in the victim's room only after the murder, in order to pilot the investigation towards the less suspectable passengers. Once again Agatha Christie revolutionized detective stories by devising another extraordinary trick.

Actually, rule n. 12 is not the only one that Christie broke – and this time one can talk about breaking rules, because Van Dine's rules had already been written six years before, when *Murder on the Orient Express* had been published. The 20th rule of Van Dine's is a list of tricks a writer should avoid, in order to create a proper detective story:

20. And (to give my Credo an even score of items) I herewith list a few of the devices which no self-respecting detective story writer will now avail himself of. They have been employed too often, and are familiar to all true lovers of literary crime. To use them is a confession of the author's ineptitude and lack of originality. [...] (j) The cipher, or code letter, which is eventually unraveled by the sleuth. (Van Dine n.p.)

As a matter of fact, Agatha Christie proves Van Dine wrong, because she uses this device without feeling self-unrespecting. According to the plot, there was a spot on a passenger's passport, which covered the name's initial. The spot was artificially made in order to better conceal the person's identity. But Poirot was shrewd enough not to be fooled.

In the end, Poirot lets the lethal jury members themselves get away with Ratchett's murder, because he understands the grief of those people, who were close to the Armstrong family and have seen it destroyed. The Belgian detective, like everyone else including the readers, knows that the correct solution is that every passenger is guilty. However he suggests two solutions to the train company responsible, who decides to communicate the other one to the authorities, with Poirot's tacit agreement. Therefore the official solution appointed a stranger as the murderer. In fact the readers are so upset by the tragic Armstrong story, that the culprits getting away with it does not disappoint them. The hideous character – in other words the victim - is in any case eliminated accordingly to Grella's analysis. Revenge is fulfilled and justice is done.

Gulddal provides a further reading of this novel and of his culprit. He tries to counter-interpret the whole plot in a totally different way and argues that Poirot's authority in *Murder on the Orient Express* is highly questionable. To begin with, the investigation Poirot has carried out, is not at all thorough. Poirot understands, or better *guesses*, that the victim is actually the Armstrong child's killer, based on a scrape of paper on which the child's name appeared. However, according to Gulddal, this was not enough to put two and two together, as Poirot did. It could have been another piece of artifact evidence, just like the others strategically put there as red herrings. Furthermore the

detective showed a remarkable memory of the Armstrong case details, even though it happened some of years before (Gulddal 5). Therefore Gulddal argues that the first of Poirot's discoveries, that is the one which sets the investigation on the right path, is based more on prejudice than on evidence, as Poirot shows not to like the victim in the first place (Gulddal 4). What is more, Poirot does not search the passengers' luggage in depth, and he does not seem to take into consideration options that differ from his idea - for instance that the murderer could have been someone traveling outside the Calais Coach. Therefore Gulddal not only concludes that in *Murder on the Orient Express* Poirot is "lazy and biased" and "overconfident", but he also suggests that the Belgian detective may be to some extent involved in culpability. This would explain why Poirot remembered the Armstrong case's details so well, and why he was so yielding in clearing the suspects from all charges at the end. One of the clues supporting the idea of Poirot being involved is that, although twelve people stabbed someone in the compartment next to his, the sleuth allegedly did not hear anything (Gulddal 11).

As thrilling and credible this theory may be, it finds no confirmation neither in the last chapter, nor in Agatha Christie's other works. It can be argued that the Dame of Crime wanted to test her reader's intellectual capacity of deduction by posing them in front of such a subtle riddle – is Poirot involved in the mischief? - that they had first to find it and then to solve it; or maybe Gulddal's insinuations serve just for the sake of speculation.

2.5 *And Then There Were None*: Guilty until Proven Dead

Ten Little Niggers (1939) is arguably one of the most well known Christies, together with *Murder on the Orient Express*. It is also known as *Ten Little Indians* because the word *nigger* was considered offensive and therefore replaced (Vurmay 1134). The first United States edition was published in 1940

as *And Then There Were None*, named after the nursery rhyme's last line. The plot keeps the readers' attention up until the very last page and the dénouement staggers the readers thanks to its originality.

As for the reviews, J. Symons thinks that *And Then There Were None* is not as good as *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, because he finds its plot artificial and not fitting into the story whereas *The Boston Transcript's* February 24, 1940 edition wrote "For absolute horror and complete bafflement Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* takes all prizes" (Sanders and Lovallo 182). Merrill argues that this novel is "one of Christie's coldest, most precise studies in human venality, unredeemed by the detective's saving competence" (Merrill 99), as the mystery would have remained unsolved if the guilty character had not written a confession. According to Christie's *Autobiography*, this was one of her most rewarding novel as well. Its plot is so brilliant that it required some effort to be conceived and written down:

I had written the book *Ten Little Niggers* because it was so difficult to do that the idea had fascinated me. Ten people had to die without it becoming ridiculous or the murderer being obvious. I wrote the book after a tremendous amount of planning, and I was pleased with what I had made of it. It was clear, straightforward, baffling, and yet had a perfectly reasonable explanation; in fact it had to have an epilogue in order to explain it. It was well received and reviewed, but the person who was really pleased with it was myself, for I knew better than any critic how difficult it had been (*Autobiography* 488).

Christie herself then adapted the novel into a play. In order to do so she had to rewrite the ending, so that at least one character survived to tell the story. In shaping her characters, Christie is generally said by the critics to be influenced by the bourgeois society in which she was raised: her characters are all members of the upper-class society and show signs of self-complacency, snobbish behavior and colonialism (Moosavinia and Khaleghpanah 3). In fact, the use of the word "nigger", though taken from the nursery rhyme, is not the only reason why this novel has been addressed as racist. One of the guests, Philip Lombard, is charged for abandoning 21 people of an African tribe to

their death, and he is brave enough to bring himself to admit it and show no trace of regret. According to Moosavinia and Khaleghpanah, Lombard is indeed the personification of the “colonial attitudes of the British who know themselves as the chosen people of the world who are to bring civilization to the uncivilized” (Moosavinia and Khaleghpanah 4). Another guest, Vera Claythorne, seems to try and justify him; after all “They were only natives...” (*And Then There Were None* 122) Lombard is a complex character indeed, as he is not only linked to racism, but also to sexism. After the third demise, when the affair is already serious and alarming, Lombard shows either to think of women as sort of angels, or to have prejudices against their shrewdness. The former option, according to which women are not capable to conceive such evil plan, seems indeed more plausible:

"At any rate, I suppose you'll leave the women out of it." The judge's eyebrows rose. He said in the famous "acid" tone that Counsel knew so well: "Do I understand you to assert that women are not subject to homicidal mania?" Lombard said irritably: "Of course not. But all the same, it hardly seems possible" (*And Then There Were None* 165)

Ironically enough, Lombard is the only character who will be eventually killed by a woman, Vera, moved by her self-preservation instinct.

In order to understand in which way Agatha Christie writes the history of crime fiction with *And Then There Were None*, one should have an overview of the main events in the book: as I will explain later in the paragraph, the British author builds up the book's plot paralleling the lines of nursery rhyme, and inserting some groundbreaking and surprising elements. Eight people are offered to spend some time on a remote island for different reasons, be it for a free holiday or for work depending on each person's needs. Two members of the household are already there, waiting for them. This makes ten people on an otherwise deserted island. The host Ulick Norman Owen or Una Nancy Owen – according to the invitations - is said to have been delayed but to be on his way.

But no more boats will dock on the island. As it happens in *Murder on the Orient Express*, guests and household are totally isolated from the external world, due to a storm, which, favorably enough for the plot development, prevents people from leaving and arriving to the island. The storm cuts the island out of the civilized world, closing up the guests in a dimension where violence and death reign and where everyone has to fight for their life. The shape of the island itself seems to embody the roughness of this struggle for self-preservation, as it leaves no space to distractions: the island is said to be quite barren and offers no other attraction than the house. Agatha Christie often uses this trick, when it comes to both focusing the reader's attention on the crime scene, and avoiding external plot distractions, such as the possibility of the police coming. During the first evening's dinner the ten people are shocked by a registered voice, which accuses everyone of having committed a crime, for whom they were not convicted. The house becomes a courtroom as the voice rises and starts charging the guests:

Into that silence came The Voice. Without warning, inhuman, penetrating . . .
 "Ladies and gentlemen! Silence, please!" Every one was startled. They looked
 round at each other, at the walls. Who was speaking? The Voice went on - a high
 clear voice.
 You are charged with the following indictments ... (*And Then There Were None*
 56)

And after listing all the charges in alphabetical order, followed by the names of each accused person, with date and victim's name, The Voice asks: "Prisoners at the bar, have you anything to say in your defense?" (*And Then There Were None* 57). That is symbolically the voice of justice, to whom all the characters gathered in the room had reportedly previously escaped once. In the dining room and in each guest's bedroom a nursery rhyme called *Ten Little Niggers* (or *Indians* or *Soldiers*, accordingly to the editions) is hanged. This nursery rhyme was originally written by Septimus Winner in 1868 (Bunson 18, quoted by Vurmay 1135). Contrary to Christie's version, Winner's has a happy ending "One little Indian living all alone; / he got married and then there were none."

When Christie adapted his novel to a play, she chose this Winner's version, in order that the last Indian stayed alive to tell the tale.

The plot continues with the guests starting to be killed one by one in a way which creepily parallels the little niggers dying in the nursery rhyme. The island is searched thoroughly by the remaining guests, who conclude that no one else is there and, as a consequence, the murderer must be among them. The reader is thrilled and starts conjecturing. Guests are dying, the survivors try and join the forces to prevent the culprit from killing them, but in the end no one will leave the island alive.

It is interesting to note that in *And Then There Were None* boundaries between conventional detective fiction roles are blurred: as they hear from the registered voice, everyone is a murderer or is at least responsible for another human being's death. On the other hand, by trying to catch the culprit who is making them die one by one, all the characters become themselves sleuths. But at the same time they will be killed at some point, which makes them victims. But at the same time, it is death itself that proves the character's innocence, for if one is dead he or she cannot be the mad mind who trapped the others in this surviving game. As Maida and Spornick (82) pinpoint, "while each participates in the detection process, each is still a suspect (until he or she becomes a victim)." And even then the readers do not get to be sure about the characters' role. With reference to the soon-to-be victim playing detection, it can be argued that Agatha Christie breaks two of Van Dine's twenty rules at the same time: according to rule n. 6 "The detective novel must have a detective in it; and a detective is not a detective unless he detects. His function is to gather clues that will eventually lead to the person who did the dirty work in the first chapter; [...]", whereas rule n. 9 states that

There must be but one detective - that is, but one protagonist of deduction - one *deus ex machina*. To bring the minds of three or four, or sometimes a gang of detectives to bear on a problem, is not only to disperse the interest and break the direct thread of logic, but to take an unfair advantage of the reader. If there is more than one detective the reader doesn't know who his codeductor is. It's like

making the reader run a race with a relay team (Van Dine n.p.).

In *And Then There Were None*'s case, however, there is no proper detective, but at the same time everyone plays detection, it being understood that they live long enough for that. The thread of logic is not broken; there are simply different threads of logic according to the character the readers are following in that passage. In order to do that, the readers are allowed to know each character's thoughts, and, as a consequence, they do not find themselves in a position of disadvantage. They also get to live again the moments of the guests' past crimes, in a vortex of memories which blur the boundaries between past and present. Moreover – but this is a detail – the criminal action is not managed in the first chapter, but it is carried on throughout the whole book. This is another proof which confirms how unconventional this crime novel is.

However, the plot's really striking cleverness lies in the fact that the last person to die, Vera, commits suicide, but someone else had prepared the scene for her, that is he or she had arranged the noose, the chair and the atmosphere in order to persuade her to kill herself. This person must be the criminal mind who organized the whole thing, but the last victim, who eventually hangs herself, seems to be the only person alive left on the island. Therefore the contradiction is clearly the main blocking element Christie uses in this novel (Singer 163).

Since there are no survivors, Christie plans an epilogue, which works as the culprit's confession. This is the only section told by a first person narrator, as the whole book's narrator is an omniscient third person narrator, who knows the point of view of each character and suggests their inner thoughts to the readers, thus enabling them to read the truth concerning their past crimes (Maida and Spornick 82). It is not until readers read the manuscript, that they get to know who did it, but above all how. The whole point of Christie's genius is to fool the readers by going against one of their simplest assumption: someone who is dead cannot be the murderer. That is exactly why the readers remain totally astonished when they know that the actual culprit was indeed victim number six! His name is Lawrence Wargrave. He was an old judge,

diagnosed with a terminal disease, and therefore he had nothing to lose. From his confession the reader discovers that he has always had a perverse pleasure in “seeing or causing death” – not by chance he was known as “the hanging judge”; a pleasure which he sublimated in his obsession for law and justice. That is why he wanted to play God and punish the sinners who did not get the fate they deserved for their past actions. Everyone on that island had escaped justice once and judge Wargrave could not accept that. He himself was guilty of having sentenced an innocent to death, according to The Voice. The “constant sense of guilt and the lucid, rational representation of Wargrave’s folly” (Ercoli 24) contribute to make this novel a masterpiece. Ironically the other guests appear to trust him with the role of guide or coordinator, because of his age and experience in the justice field. It was in fact the judge that suggested that they all had been deceived: the name of the host who invited them, U. N. Owen, is no other than a distortion of the word Unknown. In the epilogue the readers discover Wargrave’s paradox: in his deranged game he “plays the roles of justice, criminal, suspect, detective, victim and narrator” (Vurmay 1136). At this point the reader knows *whodunit*. The interesting thing becomes to discover *howdunit*. Behind every illusionist’s trick there is a simple and quite disappointing rational explanation. In the same way Wargrave fooled everyone in a straightforward way: faking his own death. In order to do so he needed a doctor by his side, to declare his death. He convinced Dr. Armstrong that he was an innocent man fearing for his life and looking for the real murderer; faking his death could have puzzled the real murderer and forced him or her to do a *faux pas*. Moreover, if each remaining guest had been convinced that the judge be dead, he could have had the chance to investigate. Dr. Armstrong accepts the deal, condemning himself to be victim number seven. As a matter of fact the rhyme lines matching the seventh victim’s death are “Four little nigger boys going out to sea; / a red herring swallowed one, and then there were three.” The use of the expression *red herring* indeed indicates that Dr. Armstrong was wrong in his believing in Wargrave’s innocence. A further clue

was given by the nursery rhyme's sixth stanza, that is the one which had to concern the judge's alleged death: "Five little nigger boys going in for law; / one got in Chancery and then there were four". That means that the judge was to be the next victim in any case, and it was therefore likely that Armstrong agreed to play the culprit's game. However, when Dr. Armstrong declared "He has been shot", he states in fact the judge's innocence in the eyes of the other guests and the readers. The judge planned a very careful and ingenious *mise en scène* for his death – or maybe one should say for *both* his deaths. Because after the last victim hangs herself, Justice Wargrave commits suicide, making it look like a murder. He kills himself exactly in the same way as in his fake death, except this time for real. By means of an elastic band trick he shoots himself in the middle of his forehead. The gunshot is a hint for those who will investigate the case: it points to the judge's being responsible for the whole plan, as it recalls the brand of Cain, and the judge is conscious of that, as he writes it in his confession. Another hint that he knows he has left behind is that the convicted man, whom he sent to die, was not at all innocent and everybody knew that, as far as the readers learn from Wargrave's account. This makes the judge the odd one out in the island, that is the only one who was not actually responsible for the death of another human being. In spite of those who say that detective fiction characters are flat and two-dimensional, Wargrave's character is worth a psychological analysis. At the beginning he is presented as a totally trustworthy and acute figure. He does not panic as The Voice bursts out – at the end the reader will know why -, he looks around attentively and the others respect him due to his role and authority. In his manuscript the reader learns to know him more thoroughly. There he writes:

For some years past I have been aware of a change within myself, a lessening of control - a desire to act instead of to judge. I have wanted - let me admit it frankly - to commit a murder myself. I recognized this as the desire of the artist to express himself! I was, or could be, an artist in crime! [...] I must - I must - I must - commit a murder! And what is more, it must be no ordinary murder! It must be a fantastical crime – something stupendous - out of the common! In that one respect, I have still, I think, an adolescent's imagination. I wanted

something theatrical, impossible! I wanted to kill... Yes, I wanted to kill. (*And Then There Were None* 303)

Nevertheless, the “innate sense of justice” which struggled in himself had always prevented him from killing an innocent person. That is how he came to the idea of killing previous murderers.

It was my ambition to invent a murder mystery that no one could solve. But no artist, I now realize, can be satisfied with art alone. There is a natural craving for recognition which cannot be gainsaid. I have, let me confess it in all humility, a pitiful human wish that some one should know just how clever I have been... (*And Then There Were None* 315)

In fulfilling his attempt to punish murderers, he defines himself as an artist and his killing human beings without anyone being able to solve the puzzle, becomes a work of art. He acts in this specific circumstance as Agatha Christie’s alter ego in the figure of an unsolvable case’s creator. In other words he is the puppet master, he creates crime fiction, staging his death’s representation. In addition to that he is able to remain lucid and cold-blooded in each step of his plan. He confesses himself proud of his deeds and wants everyone to know that he did it, but at the same time he defines his wish pitiful. Furthermore he knows how to stimulate someone’s psyche. By means of scents and atmosphere creations, he overlaps the last guest’s past and present experiences; he sort of enters her mind and suggests her that she hanged herself. That is why he addresses to the last victim’s death as “an interesting psychological experiment” (*And Then There Were None* 314). His dangerous balance between law, justice and crave for killing makes of Lawrence Wargrave one of the most successful characters in crime fiction history. The courtroom atmosphere when The Voice cuts through the silence during the first evening could and should have pointed suspicion on the only judge in the room. But then Christie apparently cleared him of all charges by making him... dead. According to Merrill, in fact, *And Then There Were None* can be considered an example of Christie’s typical use of the most likely suspect technique.

It soon becomes apparent that one of the ten is the executioner, and for most of the novel the reader surely suspects the retired judge, Justice Wargrave, who is known to have been a hanging judge and who seems the one person on the island of sufficient intelligence to plan the very complicated series of executions. But then Wargrave himself is apparently killed, and so the reader must look elsewhere for a solution that does not seem possible. Christie lifts the reader's all but certain confusion, even bewilderment, only with the final chapter, in which she prints Wargrave's confession. Christie's victory, if I may call it that, comes in forcing us to entertain unlikely solutions we cannot dismiss even though we cannot believe in them. After all, we know by the rules of the game that *someone* must be guilty. Near the end of this novel, however, all ten suspects seem to be exonerated by nothing less than death itself. (Merrill 90)

In fact, the Queen of Crime was convinced that “The whole point of a *good* detective story was that it must be somebody obvious, but at the same time, for some reason, you would then find that it was *not* obvious, that he could not possibly have done it. Though really, of course, he *had* done it” (*Autobiography* 262). That is why Maida and Spornick (84) argue that “From her predecessors in the genre, Christie learned the conventions of the genre, the formulas, the varieties of the puzzles; but out of her own genius, she invented new game plans.”

2.6 *Curtain* and the Other Side of the Sleuth

Though less well known than the previous novels, *Curtain* is for more than one reason a very original crime novel, written during World War II, as a sort of testament. She conceived this novel and *Sleeping Murder* as Poirot's and Miss Marple's last investigations, and she gave instructions so that they would get published in case she did not survive the bombing raids. She then lived a very long life and her manuscripts remained in her bank vault for another thirty years (Sanders and Lovallo 371). *Curtain* did not come out until 1975, a few months before Christie's death, whereas *Sleeping Murder* was published posthumous, in 1976. In this too Agatha was clever. As she did not know when the books would have been published, she did not set her novels in a specific period in time, that is she did not make reference to any historical, political

event or tendency (Sanders and Lovallo 372). As for *Curtain*, Christie did not want to publish it, but eventually accepted to do so due to a friend's insistence. This friend argued that Agatha Christie should have written a full stop to Poirot's career herself; otherwise another following writer could have been likely to keep Poirot alive and continue using this character after Christie's death. Furthermore, Agatha Christie has never concealed the fact that she actually got fed up with her detective after a few novels, because he was too artificial a character. She clearly preferred Miss Marple's character; that is why Sanders and Lovallo argue that Agatha "could have received quite a bit of satisfaction from finally being rid of him while she was still alive" (371). On the other hand, Miss Marple survives both the Belgian detective and Christie herself. Overall *Curtain* was positively received by the press. Both the following reviews are quoted in Sanders and Lovallo 374. In the August 1975 edition of *Newsweek*, P. S. Prescott wrote

One of Christie's most ingenious stories, a tour de force in which the lady who had bent all the rules of the genre before bends them yet again. Like all her stories, it is scrupulously honest. In a detective story, as in an allegory, much that happens [...] actually point[s] to something else, and in *Curtain* so many events are not quite what they seem that the reader may at the end feel as foolish as Hastings. (Prescott quoted by Sanders and Lovallo 374)

H. C. Veit wrote another positive review in *Literary Journal*, June 6, 1975: "The formula has not changed; the ratiocination is still provided by Poirot, whose little grey cells still function; the bumbling legwork is still done by Hastings; and the solution is just as farfetched as ever. Will be prized for years to come" (Veit quoted by Sanders and Lovallo 374).

Events take place in a house, as often happens in Christie's novels. Indeed, she preferred to set her novels in the cozy background of a countryside house or of quiet little villages. Yet, this is not just a house: it is Styles Court, the same place where Poirot had solved his first crime 55 years before, in 1920. The atmosphere there had never been joyful, in fact, as a murder had already been carried out there before (Ercoli 27). But the tone is totally different this

time, and the signs of time are clearly visible. First of all, the once glorious house is now a guest house and weeds have won their space in the garden. Poirot himself shows the signs of ageing. As a matter of fact, he started his career in 1920 already as a retired man in his sixties. This was one of Christie's greatest regrets, according to her *Autobiography* (263). As a consequence, in 1975 Poirot must have been around 120 years old. The solution to this problem was that Christie had to set his novels' time so that it flew in a slower way. In *Curtain*, Poirot is forced on a wheelchair, suffers from heart condition and his vain pretention of dyeing his hair and moustaches black has become a bit pathetic. He is also more careful than ever to avoid airflows. These are contributing factors to the general atmosphere of nostalgia which pervades the novel, together with a veil of dull sadness. Nevertheless his "little grey cells" are still perfectly working, as his deeds will prove. *Curtain*, as the title itself suggests, is Poirot's last adventure, because The Dame of Crime finally writes Poirot's demise.

In 1975 American and European newspapers published his obituary. The *New York Times*, in its August 6, 1975 edition, even published a front-page obituary with Poirot's photo, as if the Belgian detective had been a real person (Sanders and Lovallo 372). Christie's idea of killing her detective is not particularly innovative in itself: Arthur Conan Doyle had written Sherlock Holmes's death in 1893, but he was forced to adjust his plans due to his readers' indignation. However Agatha Christie's readers presumably did not have the time to make her change Poirot's destiny and make him live, as she died four months after *Curtain* was published. The novel's greatest originality lies in its plot: Poirot, at the worst of his physical shape, enjoys the company of his old friend Hastings. They had not appeared in a novel together since 1937 (Sanders and Lovallo 373), when *Dumb Witness* came out. This circumstance is already enough to state that Agatha Christie took distance from the previous tradition, that is from Arthur Conan Doyle, in whose novels and stories Watson never left Holmes's side. His influence was clear in the setting of Agatha's first

novels: a singular, idiosyncratic, brilliant sleuth backed up by a faithful, slightly slow companion, who serves as a narrator as well. Nevertheless, Christie got rid of the Watson figure, Hastings, at a certain point of her career, by sending him to Argentina (Maida and Spornick 50). Though neither possesses the gift of intuition, Hastings' role does not match Watson's, the former popping in and out in Poirot's stories, and not having such a considerable influence on his friend and sleuth. Both are crucial to confuse the readers' ideas, as they are always chasing red herrings (Maida and Spornick 51). However, he is once again by Poirot's side for his last case. In this circumstance Hastings has to play as Poirot's eyes and ears, for the old detective is crippled and forced on a wheelchair. He has to report to his Belgian friend everything that happens at Styles Court.

With reference to the plot, Agatha Christie once again does not follow the ruled path. As Ercoli (28) maintains, the psychological element is clearly predominant, and the plot is reversed, compared to the standard established pattern. Poirot is convinced from the beginning that there is a dangerous murder among the guest, and affirms that he knows his identity as well. As he has no evidence to frame this person, the detective will refer to him or her as X, to be cautious. Poirot's task in this case is to see his cunning adversary's move coming, as in a sort of deranged game of chess, and avoid that the murders take place. X is allegedly responsible for at least five murders that happened in the past, Poirot is sure of it. The thing is that for almost all these murders, the physical killer had already been caught. The Styles Court killer, who turned out to be a man called Stephen Norton, is more dangerous than that. He is in fact "the perfect murderer", according to Poirot, because he acts as a sort of Shakespearian Iago, influencing the other characters so that they commit the crime. In *Curtain*, the references to the Shakespearian tragedy *Othello* are indeed innumerable. *Othello's* incarnation of evil, Iago, is responsible for Desdemona's and Othello's death, without committing the murders himself. When Christie pictured Norton's character, she clearly drew inspiration from

him. Norton's figure is something unexpected for the readers, who are used to the standard assumption that "the murder must be committed by the murderer" (Singer 169). In Curtain's case, there are physical murderers, but they are not in full possession of their capacities and therefore they are not responsible for their crimes. They were swindled by the real murderer, who does not actually murder anyone. In fact he derives pleasure from acting as a sort of "catalyst" (Singer 169), taking advantage of other people's weaknesses. Norton even tried this trick with Hastings, and he would have been successful if it was not for Poirot. Norton touched the right chords, by suggesting to Hastings that one of Styles' guests was trying to flirt with his daughter. He did so in such a right moment and tone, that even the gentle, courteous Hastings Christie's readers had the chance to know, caught himself on the point of becoming a murderer. Poirot, who had seen that coming and knew better, prevents his old friend from murdering anyone by dropping a small amount of sleeping tablet in his glass. The next morning Hastings woke up, grateful for what he had not done, and back in his normal mental state:

I was bewildered, incredulous, disgusted, and finally immeasurably and overwhelmingly relieved. Who was it who wrote, 'The darkest day, lived till tomorrow, will have passed away'? And how true it is. I saw now, clearly and sanely, how overwrought and wrong-headed I had been. Melodramatic, lost to all sense of proportion. I had actually made up my mind to kill another human being. At this moment my eyes fell on the glass of whisky in front of me. With a shudder I got up, drew the curtains and poured it out of the window. I must have been mad last night! (*Curtain* 172)

This is the main clue Christie gives to attentive readers, who are accustomed to Hastings' usual behavior and therefore should notice that there is something wrong with him. At this point the only man who could have caused this dramatic shift in Hastings' attitude was Norton, as Poirot's friend had spoken to him previously. Poirot was successful this time in preventing Hastings from jeopardizing his role as respectable man.

You are not a murderer, Hastings! But you might have been hanged for one – for a murder committed by another man who in the eyes of the law would be guiltless. ‘You, my good, my honest, my oh so honorable Hastings – so kindly, so conscientious – so innocent! (*Curtain* 272)

In fact everyone has a murderer’s side, as Poirot himself states in *Curtain* (259) “Now you must realize this, Hastings. Everyone is a potential murderer. In everyone there arises from time to time the wish to kill – though not the will to kill.” Norton knows it and is able to make people’s “potential murderer” side emerge, thanks to subtle psychological pressure. In this way he fulfills his crave for murder, but at the same time he never finds himself involved in the detection. That is how Poirot describes Norton in one of *Curtain*’s final chapters:

And I saw that I had come across at last, at the end of my career, the perfect criminal, the criminal who had invented such a technique that he could never be convicted of crime. It was amazing. But it was not new. There were parallels. [...]. The play of Othello. For there, magnificently delineated, we have the original X. Iago is the perfect murderer. The deaths of Desdemona, of Cassio – indeed of Othello himself – are all Iago’s crimes, planned by him, carried out by him. And he remains outside the circle, untouched by suspicion [...] (*Curtain* 258-259).

Norton’s sharpness actually conceals his weakness: he has not enough nerve to commit the crime himself, but he has brains and his subtle but strong psychological power compensates this aspect of his nature of pure evil. In order to stop him all of Poirot is necessary this time. And this statement is literally meant. Poirot understands that the fact that he leaves no evidence enables him to be safe from being framed and arrested, and the only way to prevent Norton from causing other murders is to kill him. And here is how the Queen of Crime strikes again, shocking her public once more: she makes of no less than Poirot himself a killer, before making him commit suicide, in a certain way; indeed he deliberately decides to stop taking his heart pills. By turning one of her two successful characters into a murderer - and then a suicide – Christie brings the least likely suspect theory to the extreme. Nobody would suspect that the

beloved, little, extravagant, egg-shaped headed detective could deliberately kill someone. And what is more, in his current bad health conditions. The point is that he calculated his chess moves in advance, and he faked his health conditions, so that they looked worse than his actual ones. Therefore he had just enough strength to carry on a murder. At Styles Court, Poirot's literary life begins and ends in a perfectly circular way. It may seem that, by killing Stephen Norton, Poirot betrays the ideals of justice he had defended his whole life. Indeed it is a bit paradoxical that he has brought dozens of criminals to justice, and eventually he becomes one of them. And what is more, he shows the pretentious will to embody justice and condemn someone to death. Actually his sacrifice is crucial to save lives preventing Norton to cause other deaths, and perfectly meets the role he has played his whole life long, because he arrives over the edge, where "law [stands] powerless against the actual murderer" (Render 31). It is indeed his lifelong experience, that enables him to commit a murder and to make it seem like a perfectly plausible suicide. He shoots Norton exactly in the middle of his forehead, according to his usual idiosyncratic passion for order and symmetry, thus leaving his victim signed with Cain's mark. This is an intertextual reference to *And Then There Were None*, where the culprit marked himself with the same brand. Actually there is more than one similarity between the two Christies. The two murderers' methods are very similar, as Maida and Spornick (103) pinpoint. The most powerful weapon of both Norton and Justice Wargrave is their strong psychological power, thanks to which they are able to bring people to kill. However, Poirot covers up Norton's murder by making it look like a suicide, whereas Wargrave makes his own actual suicide appear as if he had been murdered. Furthermore both novels end unsolved: readers are told the whole truth in the epilogue, as usual. In *Curtain*'s case, Poirot writes a sort of letter-confession to Hastings. The following words, taken from the epilogue, are the proof of his dilemma:

Yes, my friend – it is odd – and laughable – and terrible! I, who do not approve of murder – I, who value human life – have ended my career by committing murder. Perhaps it is because I have been too self-righteous, too conscious of rectitude, that this terrible dilemma had to come to me. For you see, Hastings, there are two sides to it. It is my work in life to save the innocent – to prevent murder – and this – this is the only way I can do it! Make no mistake, X could not be touched by the law. He was safe. By no ingenuity that I could think of could he be defeated any other way. ‘And yet, my friend, I was reluctant. I saw what had to be done – but I could not bring myself to do it. I was like Hamlet – eternally putting off the evil day. (*Curtain* 260-261)

Even Poirot can find no solution to this dilemma. He does not know whether what he had done was right or not. In the last lines before the *Curtain* falls, readers seem to meet a different Poirot, or at least a side of Poirot they had never known, that is a Poirot who is conscious of his limitations and full of Hamletic doubts. Surely Poirot did not win his final battle against the forces of crime, because “he had to become a criminal in order to serve Justice” (Render 33-34).

I do not know, Hastings, if what I have done is justified or not justified. No – I do not know. I do not believe that a man should take the law into his own hands . . . ‘But on the other hand, I am the law! As a young man in the Belgian police force I shot down a desperate criminal who sat on a roof and fired at people below. In a state of emergency martial law is proclaimed. ‘By taking Norton’s life, I have saved other lives – innocent lives. But still I do not know . . . It is perhaps right that I should not know. I have always been so sure – too sure . . . ‘But now I am very humble and I say like a little child “I do not know . . .” Goodbye, cher ami. (*Curtain* 283)

To conclude, these are some of the new elements which prove how deep Agatha Christie’s mark in the history of crime fiction is. With the above-mentioned detective novels she detached herself not only from previous detective fiction rules, - as I have tried to explain in this chapter - but also from the most basic assumptions of her readers, for instance, a dead man cannot be the murderer (see *And Then There Were None*). Exactly in this lies Christie’s genius. Taking everything into consideration, it can be argued that Agatha Christie has

revolutionized crime fiction, particularly with the four novels which have been analyzed in this chapter.

3. Game as a Leitmotiv in Christie's Novels

The main rules of detective fiction game have been stated in the first chapter, whereas in the second chapter I have provided a few instances of how the Queen of Crime is keen on creating her own rules. In addition to that, this thesis aims also at seeing how Christie deals with game as a topic in her crime novels. I have selected a few novels where the connection with this topic or gaming devices as nursery rhymes is more explicit. I will not discuss in depth the obvious cases of *A Murder is Announced* (1950) and *Dead Man's Folly* (1956); in both cases a game turns out to be reality. In the latter, Ariadne Oliver, who will be one of the protagonists in *Cards on the Table*, stages a murder hunt in order to entertain her guests, except that someone will actually be murdered. Similarly, in *A Murder is Announced*, a little village's population reads in the local newspaper that a murder will take place a certain day in a certain place and everyone is invited. People thought it was a game, but in fact, it was all real.

In the following section I will examine how Agatha Christie deals with the topic of game in *The ABC Murders* (1936) and *Cards on the Table* (1936). Both novels can be seen as a two-player game between the murderer and the famous detective Hercule Poirot. It is a classical zero-sum game, that is a game in which the amount a player gains is exactly the same as the amount the opponent loses (von Neumann and Morgenstern 34, quoted in Brams). In challenging Poirot in a murder hunt and in daring a risky move during a card game respectively, the two culprits ideally place a fictitious bet, as they are convinced that they can fool Poirot; however in the end the Belgian sleuth wins this bet and takes the entire payoff that the killers have lost (for more instances of von Neumann and Morgenstern's theory, cfr. Brams 36-52). As these two novels are not among the most famous Christies ever published, – these being the four novels, which I have analyzed in the previous chapter – I have found a

smaller amount of secondary sources than I expected. Therefore the analysis and comparisons derive mostly from my personal point of view.

3.1 *The ABC Murders*' Homicide Hunt

The ABC Murders was first published in 1936 in London (see Sanders and Lovallo 133). It features Christie's famous Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. The critics greeted this novel with great enthusiasm. Julian Symons, himself a crime writer, reviewed it as "A masterwork of carefully concealed artifice... most stunningly original" (Symons quoted by Sanders and Lovallo 133). Isaac Anderson in the February 16, 1936 edition of *The New York Times* wrote "The story is a baffler of the first water, written in Agatha Christie's best manner. It seems to us the very best thing she has done, not even excepting *Roger Ackroyd*" (quoted in Sanders and Lovallo 134).

In *The ABC Murders* Christie follows the holmesian tradition and foils him once again with Captain Hastings, who is also the first person narrator. Chief Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard investigates at Poirot's side, in his official role. Japp is another of Christie's recurrent characters, as he appears in almost a dozen of her novels, including Poirot's first adventure *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, *Lord Edgware Dies* and *Peril at End House*. He is one of Christie's most successful policemen, as he changes and matures over the years and over the novels (Maida and Spornick 169). In *The ABC Murders* it is Japp, who, according to Maida and Spornick (167), provides a presage of Poirot's death in *Curtain* (1975):

"Shouldn't wonder if you ended by detecting your own death," said Japp, laughing heartily. "That's an idea, that is. Ought to be put in a book."

"It will be Hastings who will have to do that," said Poirot, twinkling at me. (*The ABC Murders*, chapter III, n.p.)

Here Christie shows to cast some glimpses at Poirot's death, which she will

write down during World War II in *Curtain*. As in the above citation from *The ABC Murders*, Hastings will be the book's narrator.

In *The ABC Murders* adventure Poirot is directly involved in detection, as the murderer invites the detective to join him in his mental game. The murderer kills four people: the first victim's name is Alice Ascher, and she was found dead in Andover; the second victim, Betty Barnard, was murdered in Bexhill-On-Sea; Sir Carmichael Clarke was killed in Churston. The serial killer also tried to kill Mr. Downes in Doncaster, but he will make a mistake, murdering another person instead. A clear alphabetical pattern can be traced in the victims' and the towns' choice. And what is more, next to each body, a railway guide, also known as ABC, was found. This makes everyone suspect that the murder be a deranged serial killer, obsessed with alphabetical order. This idea finds its confirmation in the fact that, before each murder, he sends a letter to Poirot in order to notify that he will strike again, and he is so self-conscious to confess also the exact day in which the murder will take place. His signature is ABC. Christie's brilliant idea is this time to create a murderer who is cunning enough to try and conceal a personal murder in a series of homicides. The actual victim was the third, Sir Carmichael Clarke of Churston, the only wealth victim. His brother Franklin killed him for the oldest and the most obvious of the reasons: money. The other three victims were no more than a collateral frame in which Sir Clarke's murder had to be concealed. In this, Christie drew inspiration from another writer who lived in her time, that is Gilbert K. Chesterton, creator of the investigator Father Brown; one of Father Brown's aphorism is "Where to hide a tree but in a forest? Where to hide a cross but in a sea of crosses?" Consequently Agatha Christie thought something similar to "Where to hide a specific murder but in a series of murders which seem connected?" (Ramsey 66). Franklin Clarke, the culprit, did not actually try to hide his brother's homicide, by preventing everybody from finding the corpse, for instance; but he camouflaged it under the disguise of the action of an insane criminal obsessed with alphabet. This is the same method Poe used in

“A Purloined Letter”: the stolen letter was actually in plain sight all the time, but in a disguised appearance. This is not the only red herring Christie has planned to hinder the readers’ path to the dénouement. She provides a suspect, Alexander Bonaparte Cust (ABC), who is actually very likely to be implicated in the murder himself. He suffers from amnesia and seizures, and has migraine attacks from time to time. In the very same days, he was sent selling women stockings in the towns where the murders were committed,. At a certain point he is even convinced that he killed those people for real. In the end he turned out to be a mere scapegoat. As a consequence, the actual murderer, Franklin Clarke, is a psychologically powerful person, because he convinced an innocent man that he committed the crimes. The murderer’s psychological influence on the other characters is another point that some Christies have in common – in this case, also *And Then There Were None*’s and *Curtain*’s killers have strong psychological power. Maida and Spornick (77) maintained that “Though the readers may be convinced of Cust’s guilt, Hercule Poirot is not.” Actually, also Christie’s faithful readers already knew from the beginning that Alexander was innocent. To him, Christie devotes short chapters in third person narration, introducing them with “Not from Captain Hastings’ Narrative”, thus cutting off the investigation’s narration. The way in which Cust is introduced makes the readers guess that Christie wanted everyone to believe that he is the culprit – police and readers included. As a consequence, this simply could not have been the actual solution, too easy. It could be argued that Christie wanted it to be like that, in order to let her readers feel satisfied for their little success in guessing that Cust was actually innocent, while they are unconsciously falling in her trap, failing to look at the bigger picture, that is the fake serial killer. Here the Queen of Crime proves to be always a step further than her opponents - her readers - in the crime game. In the same way Poirot proves to be smarter than Franklin Clarke, who wanted to play a game with him and defied him personally. He sent letters to his personal address:

MR. HERCULE POIROT – You fancy yourself, don't you, at solving mysteries that are too difficult for our poor thick-headed British police? Let us see Mr. Clever Poirot, just how clever you can be. Perhaps you'll find this nut too hard to crack. Look for Andover on the 21st of the Month. Yours, etc., ABC (*The ABC Murders* 15).

From such letters it is clear that the murderer is inviting Poirot to take part in his deranged game, which is shaped after a treasure-homicide hunt. Clarke, alias ABC, is clever enough to kill a fourth person, to reinforce the conviction that his brother's murder was only one of the series.

According to Brams' analysis of Von Neumann's Minimax Theory, in the zero-sum game between the murderer and the detective, variations can be introduced by means of randomizing, in other words, by making something the opponent does not expect (Brams 37-38). What Clarke does in this novel can be referred to as the act of randomizing in the zero-sum game between him and Poirot. He tried to achieve his goal – killing without being caught – by randomizing, that is by killing random people who are total strangers to the victim. In other words, the ABC logic conceals the randomized choice of his other victims. Obviously, he believed himself even cleverer than Poirot, who eventually is able to frame him, thus winning their game. Not only the Belgian sleuth unmasks Franklin Clarke; he also ensures that Clarke, once caught, does not commit suicide, by hiring a sneak thief to steal and empty Clarke's pistol. As one can easily see, Poirot wins the whole payoff, and Clarke loses it all, in the most classical of the two-person zero-sum game.

The ABC Murders, together with *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* for instance, is a special case in which Christie brings the least likely suspect theory to the extreme; in such cases the murderer is not really the least likely suspect, but rather the never suspected one (Merrill 92), because the readers are more inclined to look at Clarke as a member of the helping team. This is exactly what happens for Dr. Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

A further analysis that can be offered concerns Singer's blocking element theory, which has already been cited and used in the previous chapters with

reference to the other Christie novels. Singer argues that the blocking element the author uses in this novel is the “too much information” element, the same adopted in *Murder on the Orient Express*, where Agatha Christie wants to puzzle the readers by inserting too many false clues (Singer 162); in this case Christie brings the “too much information” element to a further point, as the false clues are even the other murders, which work as an ingenious cover up scheme.

In addition to the game, which remains the novel’s main topic, Christie here also looks at the topic of xenophobia, which is shared also by other Christie’s plots. According to Coetzee, Christie’s fiction is indeed “peppered with stereotypical depiction of foreigners, which appear to endorse the mainstream way of thinking about foreigners at the time” (Coetzee 192). In more than one instance the word “foreigner” is used in *The ABC Murders* in a derogatory sense: a furious Franklin Clarke addresses Poirot as “You unutterable little jackanapes of a foreigner!” (*The ABC Murders* 247); before in the same book another man, whose identity is not paramount for the dénouement, shows all his disapproval of the foreigners, growling “Told it to the blarsted police, I’ve, and now I’ve got to spit it all out again to a couple of blarsted foreigners” (*The ABC Murders* 53). Even Inspector Crome, who is institutionally charged to carry on the investigation, does not seem to like the Belgian very much: “His manner said ‘Really – these foreigners! All the same!’” (*The ABC Murders* 67). Xenophobia is in fact a recurrent topic in Christie’s novels as well. Other instances of this phenomenon occur in *Murder on the Orient Express*:

“He has been a long time in America,” said M. Bouc, “and he is an Italian, and Italians use the knife! And they are great liars! I do not like Italians.”

“Ça se voit,” said Poirot with a smile “Well, it may be that you are right, but I will point out to you, my friend, that there is absolutely no evidence against the man.”

“And what about the psychology? Do not Italians stab?”

“Assuredly,” said Poirot. (*Murder on the Orient Express* 141-142)

This assertion on a foreigner – in this case an Italian person - being untrustworthy is further repeated in the book, when one passenger, Masterman, tries to provide an alibi for the Italian man suspected by Mr. Bouc: “And I can swear positively that he never left the carriage all last night. So, you see, sir, he couldn’t have done it. Tonio may be a foreigner, sir, but he’s a very gentle creature. Not like those nasty murdering Italians one reads about” (*Murder on the Orient Express* 235). From this assertion one can assume that Masterman is biased against Italians and thinks that they are “nasty murdering” people. Prejudice towards foreigners lies also in the concessive meaning of verb “may” in the previous statement. According to Coetzee, this feeling of “suspicion and distrust” towards foreigners may be fuelled by the “promotion of patriotism and the impact of war years” (Coetzee 195). Fillingim shares this opinion and argues that in Christie’s times “no English man, woman or child could go unaffected and uninterested by [imperialist] [...] vehicles of propaganda” (Fillingim 66). Therefore it was no surprise that that British society was racist, and Christie’s fiction simply reflects racial prejudices which characterize it.

To conclude, Clarke, the murderer, challenges Poirot personally in a murder-hunt, complete with clues to give Poirot and the police the chance to blow his plans up. This makes this novel look like a particular game between the murderer and the detective, as if the murderer wanted to outsmart Poirot’s intellectual capacities. This is just one of the ways in which Christie shows how she enjoys disguising the theme of game in her novels. Another way is displayed in *Cards on the Table*.

3.2 Ladies and Gentlemen, Place your Bets! Who Dun It in *Cards on the Table*?

1936 was a successful year for Agatha Christie’s literary production, as both *The ABC Murders* and *Cards on the Table* were published (see Sanders and Lovallo 133 and 139). Hercule Poirot is once again the protagonist sleuth, who

will eventually unveil the truth. These two novels are considerably different from each other. The former is shaped as a deadly treasure hunt, a race against time, in order to prevent the murderer from committing another crime, whereas *Cards on the Table* is one of the most psychological books Agatha Christie has ever written. There is no large variety of suspects, - they are only four, “the lowest number in any Christie novel” (Merrill 93) - but this does not imply that the book is less thrilling. Agatha Christie knows that this novel is slightly different from the others; indeed she writes a foreword in order to warn her readers about it:

There are only *four* starters and any one of them, *given the right circumstances*, might have committed the crime. That knocks out forcibly the element of surprise. Nevertheless there should be, I think, an equal interest attached to four persons, each of whom has committed murder and is capable of committing further murders. They are four widely divergent types, the motive that drives each one of them to crime is peculiar to that person, and each one would employ a different method. The deduction must, therefore, be entirely *psychological*, but it is none the less interesting for that, because when all is said and done it is the *mind* of the murderer that is of supreme interest. (*Cards on the Table* n.p.)

As a consequence, there are neither least likely nor most likely suspects. Each character’s guilt is equally plausible (Merrill 93).

In this novel’s case, again, reviews were totally enthusiastic. In the February 21, 1937 edition of *Books* (*New York Herald Tribune*) Will Cuppy wrote “We always say there’s nobody quite like Agatha Christie when she puts her mind to it, and that’s what she has done in *Cards on the Table*” (quoted by Sanders and Lovallo 142).

Four sleuths and four people who had allegedly committed murder in the past are invited to Mr. Shaitana’s place for dinner. Among the sleuths, the famous detective Monsieur Poirot, the crime novel writer Ariadne Oliver, Colonel Race and Superintendent Battle of Scotland Yard. All of them appear in other Christie novels as well. Ariadne Oliver is a particularly interesting character: she is normally recognized as Christie’s alter ego. Both the women writers, the real and the fictional ones, have created a detective of their own –

Mrs. Oliver's was a Finn - and then got fed up and wanted to dispose of them. Moreover during the dinner at Shaitana's place, Oliver is said to have written *The Body in the Library*, an actual 1942 novel of Christie's. She could be the perfect foil for Hercule Poirot, because the Belgian order-and-method-obsessed sleuth could not be more different from the bungling Oliver. Through Oliver's character Agatha Christie intends to make a parody of herself. Therefore she exaggerates Oliver's idiosyncrasies – for instance, she has an overwhelming passion for apples (Maida and Spornick 140-143). The queer company is completed by the foursome of undiscovered past murders, Anne Meredith, Dr. Roberts, Mrs. Lorrimer and Major Despard. During dinner Shaitana hinted at allusions which made one of the murderers feel particularly unsafe. After dinner the two quartets split in different rooms to play bridge. After some rounds, Mr. Shaitana is found stabbed in his armchair, in the room where the four murderers were playing.

Shaitana is described as a Mephistophelian, weird man “of whom nearly everybody was a little afraid”, because “There was a feeling, perhaps, that he knew a little too much about everybody” (*Cards on the Table* 12). In the book's first chapter, during a talk with Poirot, he displays the intention of showing to him his “collection” of unconvicted murderers. This dangerous exhibition of his, together with his slightly boastful attitude, had been fatal. At dinner he crossed the line with allusive statements such as ‘Poison is a woman's weapon,’ he said. ‘There must be many secret women poisoners – never found out. [...]‘A doctor, too, has opportunities’; or also “There's always an accident – a shooting accident, for instance – or the domestic kind of accident.” (*Cards on the Table* 27). By means of these statements he aimed at making clear that he knew. This subtle game of Shaitana's proved him right, on one hand, but on the other brought him to his demise. The creepy, undesirable character is eliminated and Grella's theory that the victim is most of the times an unpleasant character is once more confirmed (see Grella 42-43). The four investigators divide the tasks, but it is Hercule Poirot, who takes charge of the situation. He

is not interested in physical evidence. He focuses rather on questioning the four suspects and examining their game scores.

‘What’s the idea of the bridge scores, M. Poirot?’

Poirot spread them on the table.

‘They are illuminating, do you not think? What do we want in this case? A clue to character. And a clue not to one character, but to four characters. And this is where we are most likely to find it – in these scribbled figures. (*Cards on the Table* 59)

Poirot’s typical third grade question was “The good superintendent has asked you your opinion of your companions as candidates for murder. I now ask you for your opinion of them as bridge players” (*Cards on the Table* 51). Poirot’s point was that, whoever was capable of daring moves in game, was also likely to do that in real life. Thus the game becomes in this case the mirror which reflects the players’ personality, and therefore an invaluable source of information for a shrewd detective. A simple game of bridge provides Poirot with precious information about the players’ nature. He delved into their bridge rounds to discover which one of the four could have been so daring to take a huge risk such as stabbing a man in the same room where other three people were playing cards. Theoretically speaking, all four of the players had the opportunity to kill Shaitana, because according to the rules of bridge, each player in turn is the dummy, that is he or she has a spare round and is free to leave the table where the others keep on playing. All the four of them did so at least once. Bridge scores turned out to be very useful for Poirot, who does not lay his *cards on the table* until the last chapter, that is one of the famous confrontation scenes he enjoys so much: “It was Poirot’s moment, every face was turned to his in eager anticipation. ‘You are very kind,’ he said, smiling. ‘You know, I think, that I enjoy my little lecture. I am a prosy old fellow’” (*Cards on the Table* 313). The scores suggested, together with the players’ game reconstruction, that Dr. Roberts played a risky move almost haphazardly, before being the dummy. That was in order to keep the players’ attention

focused on the game, while he stabbed their host to death. Again the doctor, one of Christie's most frequently used culprits, did it. As it often happens with the Dame of Crime, the murderers are two-dimensional characters: in their public sphere they are well estimated and respected, whereas their private sphere is flawed by greed and vice, which make them capable of killing (Maida and Spornick 75). Poirot had already suspected Dr. Roberts for a long time before possessing evidence to frame him. In the end, he wins the game between him and Dr. Roberts. He proves himself right, as usual, and he certifies the statement he made in the middle of the book: "'No one can always be right,' said Mrs Lorrimer coldly. 'I am,' said Poirot. 'Always I am right. It is so invariable that it startles me'" (*Cards on the Table* 272).

Cards on the Table has a remarkable number of similarities with another of Christie's masterpieces, *And Then There Were None*. First of all the two novels share the idea of past murderers who got away with their crimes, and have to come to terms with it. Indeed, in both novels a queer host forces a group of characters, who have once been killers, to face their past faults. Furthermore, in both cases the murder – murders in *And Then There Were None*'s case – takes place in a closed space (considering the island a closed space because no one could leave it or reach it).

In conclusion, the theme of game is tackled more than once in *Cards on the Table*. In addition to the zero-sum game between the sleuth and the killer, chronologically speaking, the first game is Shaitana's, specifically the dinner he organizes. He wants to show off his collection of murderers, and he thinks himself able to manage this subtle balance between safety and danger, justice and death. In the end he is proved wrong: danger prevails and death comes, so that his game ends up being mortal. But the more straightforward way to spot the theme of game in this novel is with reference to bridge. The book title refers not only to this card game, but it is also a metaphor for making other people aware of one's moves and intentions. This game not only provides the setting in which the murder takes place; it is also conceived as a means to understand

people's personality, and therefore as a most valuable clue to find out whodunit.

3.3 A Startling Combination of Crime and Children's Verses

Nursery rhymes are one aspect of children's games. This gaming device is supposedly useful for kids, so that they learn quickly and memorize easily, in a playful background. Agatha Christie takes advantages from nursery rhymes to enrich her novels; she is extraordinarily gifted when it comes to dealing with a crime's horror, spiced up with a subtle veil of childish light heartedness. She does so by using nursery rhymes as a linking thread in some of her crime novels. Nursery rhymes are verses "customarily told or sung to small children" (*Encyclopedia Britannica Online* <https://www.britannica.com/art/nursery-rhyme>). It seems therefore a bit odd to melt them with such a literary genre as crime fiction. However, this combination, though undoubtedly curious, reflects the carefree environment in which Agatha grew up. Moreover, it perfectly fits her style: absurd as it may seem for someone who writes about homicides, she abhors blood and violence, and goes preferably for *gentle* deaths and light-hearted atmospheres. By means of nursery rhymes, in some cases, she also gives clues to her most attentive readers. In the previous chapter I explained how Christie uses the nineteenth-century counting out rhyme "Ten Little Niggers" in *And Then There Were None*. There are other instances in which Christie enjoys "maintaining a delicate balance between levity and horror in what might be considered a serio-comic perspective" (Maida and Spornick 70). As for the novels related to the game topic by means of nursery rhymes, I will not go through all of them. For example, I will leave *The Crooked House* (1949) and *Hickory Dickory Dock* (1955) behind. The first refers back to the nursery rhyme "There Was a Crooked Man", whereas the second novel carries exactly the nursery rhyme's title. Other occurrences in which Christie uses

nursery rhymes are *Three Blind Mice* (1950), *The Clocks* (1963), *The Third Girl* (1966), “The Market Basing Mystery” in *Hercule Poirot’s Early Cases* (1974).

Bargainnier argues that Christie uses several methods to make her novels fit the rhymes’ pattern.

The detective may be given the vital clue by the rhyme, as in [...] “Sing a Song of Sixpence” [– and in, *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, I would add]. On the other hand, from a warped sense of humor, the murderer may be following a nursery rhyme in his killings; *And Then There Were None* and *A Pocket Full of Rye* are illustrations. In *Crooked House* and *An Overdose of Death* (original title *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*), the rhyme serves as the organizing principle; in the first by presenting the basic situation and in the second by outlining Poirot’s investigation. Finally, there are those works in which the rhyme is simply imposed upon the story with little purpose or effect: *Hickory Dickory Death* and *Murder in Retrospect* (original title *Five Little Pigs*). (Bargainnier 169)

As for *The Clocks*, for instance, Christie uses just one verse of the nursery rhyme “Oh, what have you got for dinner Mrs. Bond?”, that is “Dilly, dilly, dilly, come and be killed”. This novel contains a few intertextual relations, as Christie refers to Arthur Conan Doyle and John Dickinson Carr, who were both influent crime writers. Furthermore Christie inserts a quotation from *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. Interestingly enough, the fact that rhymes are an element of the British literary tradition also has editorial consequences: foreign editors – meaning not British – decided that it was reasonable to change the titles completely because they would not make sense for foreign readers, who are not accustomed to British nursery rhymes.

Finally, the secondary sources concerning the novels I am going to analyze in the following paragraphs were very few. In this section I will explain and in some cases interpret how Christie connects novels with nursery rhymes.

3.3.1 *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*: When the Important Clue Lies in the Title

One, Two, Buckle My Shoe was first published in London by Collins in 1940. The following year it was published by Dodd Mead in the United States with a totally different title, *The Patriotic Murders* (Ercoli 89), which is reported to “reflect American support of the British war effort” (Sanders and Lovallo 189). As there is actually nothing patriotic in the book, the American title has later been changed into *An Overdose of Death* (Sanders and Lovallo 189). Its original title is identical to the first verse of the nursery rhyme Agatha drew inspiration from. As for the reviews, Will Cuppy wrote in *Books* (*New York Herald Tribune*) (3/2/1941) “As usual, this author provides generous amounts of entertainment over and above the bare bones of a puzzle. This seems to be a major Christie, the best thing currently in sight for all-round mystery merit” (Cuppy quoted by Sanders and Lovallo 190). While analyzing *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*’s case, Cawelti maintains that

In general there seem to be six main ways in which a reader can be effectively mislead about a fictional crime: he can be deceived as to the person, the motive, the means of the crime, the time at which it is committed, the place where it occurs, and, finally, whether it is a crime or not. In this case, Christie manages to work all these modes of mystification into her pattern. (Cawelti 114)

This time events take place in London. A dentist is found shot in his office. Fate had arranged that that morning one of the dentist’s patients was no less than Hercule Poirot, brought there for a normal toothache. Even the greatest sleuths have toothache, and that morning Poirot did not wear his ordinary pompous attitude; he was just a man afraid of the dentist. This time Poirot is by chance involved in the investigation. The nursery rhyme in question is the following:

One, two, buckle my shoe;
Three, four, shut the door;

Five, six, pick up sticks;
Seven, eight, lay them straight;
Nine, ten, a good fat hen;
Eleven, twelve, men must delve;
Thirteen, fourteen, maids a-courting;
Fifteen, sixteen, maids in the kitchen;
Seventeen, eighteen, maids a-waiting;
Nineteen, twenty, my plate's empty.

The first printed version of this nursery rhyme appeared in London in 1805, in a children songbook. It was useful for children to learn how to count, and it is said to refer to a 17th/18th century lace maker's typical day (<https://allnurseryrhymes.com/one-two-buckle-my-shoe/>).

Agatha Christie divides her plot in sections, which are named after the nursery rhyme's lines. The plot is quite entangled; I will try and do my best to set it straight. The first line - the same as Christie's novel's title - sounds like "One, Two, Buckle My Shoe". The first glimpse Poirot has of one of the most important characters is in fact a buckled shoe, protruding from a taxi. Mabelle Sainsbury Seale is descending at the same time when Poirot is walking away from the dentist's office. As it happens, the title points to the fundamental clue which leads Poirot to the dénouement, but the readers do not realize it soon enough. Later in the novel, when Mrs. Sainsbury Seale's corpse is found, Poirot will notice that the cadaver's pair of shoes was exactly the same as the pair of shoes the lady was wearing that morning, except they were older, worn out, and different in size. He deduces that someone wanted to look exactly like Mabelle Sainsbury Seale, but he still does not know which of the two ladies is the real one.

The "Three, Four, Shut the Door" section deals with the dentist's death and the first interviews with those - patients and co-workers - who were in the dentist's office that morning, who have automatically become suspects. After a couple of third degrees Poirot and the police discover that the patient they had

to interview next, M. Amberiotis, has died, poisoned by a deathly dentist injection. The chapter's closure is ambiguous: "To Hercule Poirot it was as though a door had gently but firmly shut." (*One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* 33). It clearly echoes the nursery rhyme verse. There can be numerous meanings to this final statement. M. Amberiotis' death corroborates the hypothesis of the dentist's suicide because of a fatal mistake with one of his patients; as a consequence it could be argued that, by providing this alternative and valid solution to his murder, the killer tried to shut the figurative "door", that is the path which lead to his real intentions, and point to the one which lead to suicide. Moreover Amberiotis' death prevents Poirot and the police from interviewing him and listening to his testimony. This trail, which could have been most valuable, had been, so to speak, "shut".

In the following section, named after the nursery rhyme's third line "Five, Six, Pick up Sticks", Mrs. Sainsbury Seale's dead body is found and Poirot starts gathering his "sticks", that is important testimonies and clues. Until the end of this section the reader is able to follow Poirot's thoughts. From this point onwards, it becomes clear that Poirot has drawn "major deductions about the case" (Cawelti 112). Some trails start developing in his mind.

A bird had flown past the window with a twig in its mouth. He too, had been collecting twigs. Five, six, pick up sticks...

He had the sticks--quite a number of them now. They were all there, neatly pigeonholed in his orderly mind - but he had not as yet attempted to set them in order. That was the next step - lay them straight (*One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* 118).

In fact, the following section is "Seven, Eight, Lay Them Straight", and expresses Poirot's necessity of making "his little grey cells" work in order to clarify his thoughts and sort them by means of his renowned method based on order and symmetry.

"Nine, Ten, a Good Fat Hen": Poirot spends some time with one of the dentist's patients, Mr. Blunt, and his family. The detective has the neat

impression that he had already spoke on the phone with his niece, Mrs. Olivera, and it was not a pleasant conversation: his interlocutor had menaced him, so that he gave up his search for the truth. Mrs. Olivera is in fact the rhyme's "good, fat hen", as Poirot asks himself: "But it was impossible! It could not have been Mrs. Olivera who had spoken over the phone! That empty-headed society woman - selfish, brainless, grasping, self-centered? What had he called her to himself just now? "That good fat hen? C'est ridicule!" said Hercule Poirot" (*One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* 152).

The meaning of "Eleven, Twelve, Men Must Delve" is quite literal and straightforward, with reference to a detective's activities. In this section, indeed, Poirot makes a careful search for information, that is "delves", into the Blunts affairs. "Thirteen, Fourteen, Maids Are Courting" refers to another piece of Poirot's investigation, which goes to its right spot. Indeed, one of the suspects is courting Jane, a young woman in Mr. Blunt's family. In the "Fifteen, Sixteen, Maids in the Kitchen" section, Poirot interviews a young woman, who is a member of the household in the dentist's house, indeed the "maid in the kitchen". Her testimony proves to be very important, because it gives the Belgian sleuth the last missing pieces of information to reconstruct the puzzle. "Seventeen, Eighteen, Maids are waiting" is the section in which the truth is unveiled. In fact, at this point, not only the "maids", but also all Christie's readers are waiting for the final revelation. The nursery rhyme's verse before the last is recalled on page 247, and reveals that there is a specific person to whom the verse refers: "Hercule Poirot went down, to where a girl was waiting." (*One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* 247) It is Jane, who craves for knowing the output of Poirot and Mr. Blunt's dialog, for a huge part of her future marriage depended on it. The last, short chapter's title is "Nineteen, Twenty, My Plate Is Empty". A cheerful conversation with one of the former suspects dispels the last doubt of Poirot's; in other words it emptied the detective's head. The circle closes around the events, everything makes perfect sense and Poirot can walk back home with a carefree mind, and nothing but a

nursery rhyme in his head.

One, Two, Buckle My Shoe is, according to Cawelti, an example of Christie's use of the least likely suspect, as the murderer "is presented throughout the book not as a suspect but as a victim, and [...] remains a rather marginal figure in the inquiry until he is unmasked at the very end" (Cawelti 113).

3.3.2 Five Little... Suspects

Five Little Pigs is both the title of the nursery rhyme and of Agatha Christie's crime novel. The latter was published in London in 1942 and appeared the same year in the United States with the title *Murder in Retrospect* (Ercoli 89). Indeed it deals with a young woman charging Poirot to take up an investigation to clear her dead mother's memory by proving her innocent of her husband's murder, for which she had been convicted sixteen years before. It is chronologically the first of Christie's novels in which the detective is asked to solve a riddle related to a crime "in retrospect", as the American title suggests (Sanders and Lovallo 203). According to the *New York Times* journalist Isaac Andrews, this book is "another triumph for Agatha Christie, perhaps the greatest in her career" (June 28, 1943). Robert Barnard shares this opinion, maintaining in *A Talent to Deceive*, 1980, that "...this is the best Christie of all" (both writers quoted by Sanders and Lovallo 203). These reviews may well be considered slightly far-fetched, as there are arguably other Christies, which were more successful than this one (see *And Then There Were None* or *Murder on the Orient Express*). Furthermore Sanders and Lovallo point out that the "love triangle in the book has strong emotional parallels to the triangle that broke up Christie's first marriage" (Sanders and Lovallo 203).

The nursery rhyme Christie uses dates back to the 18th century. It has to be sung together with a finger play, while pointing at one child's toe for each line, and tickling the baby's foot at the end, after having played with the pinkie

toe (<https://allnurseryrhymes.com/this-little-piggy/>). The nursery rhyme's lines are taken from the same website:

This little piggy went to the market,
This little piggy stayed home,
This little piggy had roast beef,
This little piggy had none,
And this little piggy cried wee wee wee all the way home.

This time the lines provide no further clue for the readers; they rather describe the characters involved in the investigation. Bargainnier maintains that *Five Little Pigs* does not “have the sense of careful meshing of the rhyme and the plot which *And Then There Were None*, Christie’s best use of a nursery rhyme, illustrates so superbly.” (Bargainnier 169). With reference to the plot, Bargainnier does have a point, but, actually, the parallel between the nursery rhyme and the novel is clear, because it is Poirot himself who draws it. There are five suspects, and each one corresponds to one of the little pigs. Here they are. The Blake brothers, Philip and Meredith, were the victim’s best friends. They are quite different from each other. Christie described Philip as a “Stockbroker. Plays the markets and gets away with it. Successful man [...]” (*Five Little Pigs* 20), whereas Meredith is a “country squire – a stay-at-home sort of chap.” (*Five Little Pigs* 20). Immediately in Poirot’s mind, a nursery rhyme starts to take a definite shape: “A jingle ran through Poirot's head. He repressed it. He must not always be thinking of nursery rhymes. It seemed an obsession with him lately. And yet the jingle persisted: "This little pig went to market, this little pig stayed at home..."” (*Five Little Pigs* 21). This idea lingers in Poirot’s mind, and the rhyme’s verse resonates in his head when he first meets Philip Blake: “Hercule Poirot thought suddenly that he looked rather like a contented pig. A pig. This little pig went to market... [...] No remorseful thoughts, no uneasy twinges of conscience from the past, no haunting memories here. No, a well-fed pig who had gone to market - and fetched the full price...”

(*Five Little Pigs* 51).

Suspect number 3 is Elsa Greer. She had an affair with the victim, at the moment of his death. Christie's presentation of Elsa Greer does do justice to her fame: "She's been a go-getter. She's had three husbands since then. In and out of the divorce court as easy as you please. And every time she makes a change, it's for the better." (*Five Little Pigs* 21). Poirot deduces that she must be the little pig who "ate roast beef," that is the little pig who got to have all the fortune in her life. Then comes Cecilia Williams, suspect and little pig number four. She was the governess in the victim's house and has never been as good-looking, lucky and fortunate as Elsa. Christie's description of her house is emblematic: "The square of carpet was threadbare, the furniture battered and of poor quality. It was clear to Hercule Poirot that Cecilia Williams lived very near the bone. There was no roast beef here. This was the little pig that had none" (*Five Little Pigs* 94). The last suspect is Angela Warren, half sister of the victim's wife. She's described as a self-confident and "alarming young woman" (*Five Little Pigs* 21), to the point that Poirot asked his interlocutor "She is not, then, the little pig who cried, 'Wee-wee-wee'...?" [...] "She's had something to cry wee-wee about in her life! She's disfigured, you know. Got a bad scar down one side of her face. She - oh, well, you'll hear all about it, I dare say" (*Five Little Pigs* 21).

To sum up, Agatha Christie used a nursery rhyme in this case in a very different way, compared to *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*: the rhyme does not help structuring the plot and does not give clues to the readers. It is just a refrain in Poirot's mind, which Christie uses in order to build up her novel's characters.

3.3.3 *A Pocket Full of Rye*: Between Nursery Rhymes and Reality

A Pocket Full of Rye was published in London by Collins in 1953, and in New York by Dodd Mead the following year. The main detective is a policeman, Inspector Neele, but it is Miss Jane Marple who unveils the truth in the end. As

this is the only Miss Marple novel which will be analyzed in this thesis, I will briefly give an overview of her character. In *A Pocket Full of Rye* she plays a less prominent role, in comparison to other Christie's novels, in which she is the absolute investigation protagonist. The external narrator indeed follows Inspector Neele's point of view, and Miss Marple does not appear until the half of the book. Her investigating style is very different from Poirot's, and Christie showed, in more than one occurrence, that she preferred the fluffy, lovely spinster to the Belgian detective. For instance, as I have previously written, Miss Marple will survive to both Poirot and Agatha Christie herself. It can be argued that Miss Marple was forged after Christie's grandmother: the two old ladies have indeed some traits in common, but there are at the same time some differences between them, as Agatha Christie herself points out in her *Autobiography*:

Miss Marple was not in any way a picture of my grandmother; she was far more fussy and spinsterish than my grandmother ever was. But one thing she did have in common with her—though a cheerful person, she always expected the worst of everyone and everything, and was, with almost frightening accuracy, usually proved right. 'I shouldn't be surprised if so-and-so isn't going on,' my grandmother used to say, nodding her head darkly, and although she had no grounds for these assertions, so-and-so was exactly what was going on (*Autobiography* 450).

Miss Marple characterizes herself as an expert of human nature. This enables her to possess the right intuition and the capacity of guessing things that other people simply do not get. She is never foiled by any Watson-figure, but there is always a policeman, who is charged to carry out the official investigation. Miss Marple's most effective investigating weapon is the activity, which the majority of the old spinsters prefer, that is gossip. She has the ability to "say the right things to the right people" (Maida and Spornick 114), but above all to listen to them. That is exactly what she does in *A Pocket Full of Rye*. As for the reviews, they were cautiously positive. For instance, the *New Yorker* wrote that "[t]his is not one of the authors best books, but it is still a model of skulduggery in genteel surroundings" (Sanders and Lovallo 278).

With reference to the plot, Mr. Rex Fortescue, a wealthy businessman, is poisoned. The most startling and incomprehensible detail for the police is the rye which was found in the dead body's pocket. Not long after that, two other bodies are discovered: his young and not at all woeful wife Adele is poisoned as well, and the maid servant Gladys is strangled in the garden. The nursery rhyme in question is "Sing a Song of Sixpence". It traces back to 1744, when it was first recorded (<https://allnurseryrhymes.com/sing-a-song-of-sixpence/>).

Sing a song of sixpence,
A pocket full of rye.
Four and twenty blackbirds,
Baked in a pie.

When the pie was opened,
The birds began to sing;
Wasn't that a dainty dish,
To set before the king?

The king was in his counting house,
Counting out his money;
The queen was in the parlour,
Eating bread and honey.

The maid was in the garden,
Hanging out the clothes;
When down came a blackbird
And pecked off her nose.

Actually the version Agatha Christie uses ends with "When there came a little dicky bird and nipped off her nose" (*A Pocket Full Of Rye*, chapter 14, n.p.). According to the tradition, the King is King Henry VIII. His wife Catherine of Aragon is allegedly the Queen, and Anne Boleyn the maid in the garden. There were often riots and conspiracies against Henry VIII, and Blackbirds are reportedly the whistleblowers who gave the conspirators in, and were therefore rewarded through rye (<https://owlcation.com/humanities/Curious-Origins-of-Nursery-Rhymes-Sing-a-Song-of-Sixpence>).

The similarities between this nursery rhyme and Christie's novel are surprising. The King is obviously Rex Fortescue. Not only does his name hint in this direction (Rex meaning "king" in Latin); he was also a very wealthy businessman, who possessed a financial reign of his own. He dies in his office, that is "counting out his money", with a pocketful of rye in his jacket, according to the nursery rhyme verse. His wife played the role of the Queen till the end, as she dies while she is drinking tea, and eating scones and honey ("A Song of Sixpence", line 12) in the parlor (line 11), just like the rhyme's Queen. The maid, Gladys, is found strangled in the garden ("A Song of Sixpence", line 13). The creepy detail is that, after having killed her, the murderer drag her where clothes were hanging and clipped her nose with a clothes peg to symbolize that her nose had been pecked off by a blackbird (see the nursery rhyme's last line).

It was Miss Marple who connected the dots and saw the tremendous resemblance between the triple murder and the nursery song. She gave Inspector Neele the heads up, and put him on the right path suggesting that he should look for blackbirds.

"...it's the rhyme that strikes one, isn't it?" [...] "I expect you're about thirty-five or thirty-six, aren't you Inspector Neele? I think there was rather a reaction just then, when you were a little boy, I mean, against nursery rhymes. But if one has been brought up on Mother Goose³ - I mean it is really highly significant, isn't it? What I wondered was [...] have you gone into the question of blackbirds?" For about ten seconds Inspector Neele stared at Miss Marple with the utmost bewilderment. His first idea was that the old lady had gone off her head. "Blackbirds?" he repeated. Miss Marple nodded her head vigorously. (*A Pocket Full of Rye*, chapter 13 – 14, n.p.)

At this point Miss Marple recited the rhyme verses. Neele finally has an explanation for the pocketful of rye, and, while asking for blackbirds, he discovers that there had been unpleasant episodes in the house, connected to

³ "Fictitious old woman, reputedly the source of the body of traditional children's songs and verses known as nursery rhymes." (*Encyclopedia Britannica Online*)
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mother-Goose-fictional-character>

them. Once, four dead blackbirds had been found on Mr. Fortescue's table (line 3); and another time the pie's filling had been replaced by blackbirds (line 4). All these references to blackbirds can be linked to Blackbird Mine; property of Rex Fortescue, it is the African gold mine which turns out to be the source of all the novel's troubles and deaths.

Taking everything into consideration, the use of nursery rhyme is more concrete in this novel, than it is in *Five Little Pigs*, for instance, as it is not only a mere characters' description, but instead it influences the plot. Moreover, the verses are this time in the murderer's mind, and not in the detective's, as in both the novels which have previously been analyzed. Finally, the similarities between this novel and again *And Then There Were None* are remarkable. In both novels the murderer comes up with the idea of killing people paralleling a rhyme's lines and stages these deaths using the verses as a rough scheme for planning his homicides.

To conclude, game is indeed a recurrent topic in Christie's novels. The considerable number of such occurrences testifies the close bond which ties Christie to the theme of game or nursery rhymes. In her plots she inserts them in the most ingenious ways, and she enjoys modeling her novels or her characters according to gaming schemes and nursery rhymes. In the three novels which have been analyzed, the nursery rhyme is used each time in a different way: in *One, Two Buckle My Shoe* it builds up the book's structure and chapter division and it is therefore in the author's mind; in *Five Little Pigs* it reflects a parallel which Poirot draws between the suspects and the rhyme's pigs. This makes clear that the rhyme is in this case in the detective's mind; finally, in *A Pocket Full of Rye* it is in the murderer's mind, as he uses it as a rough scheme to commit his mischievous actions.

Appendix

A Brief Chronology to Sum Up

- 1828 *Mémoires* (E. Vidocq)
- 1841 “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (E. A. Poe)
- 1842 “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (E. A. Poe)
- 1843 “The Gold Bug” (E. A. Poe)
- 1844 “The Purloined Letter” (E. A. Poe)
- 1849 E. A. Poe dies
- 1853 *Bleak House* (C. Dickens)
- 1866 *L’Affaire Lerouge* (É. Gaboriau)
Le Crime d’Orcival (É. Gaboriau)
- 1867 *Le Dossier 113* (É. Gaboriau)
- 1868 *The Moonstone* (W. Collins)
Les Esclaves de Paris (É. Gaboriau)
- 1869 *Monsieur Lecoq* (É. Gaboriau)
- 1870 Dickens Dies
The Mystery of Edwin Drood (C. Dickens), unfinished
- 1873 Gaboriau dies
- 1887 *A Study in Scarlet* (A. C. Doyle)
- 1889 Collins dies
- 1890 *The Sign of the Four* (A. C. Doyle)
A. Christie is born
- 1892 *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (A. C. Doyle)
- 1893 “The Adventure of the Final Problem” (A. C. Doyle) features Holmes to
fall to death
- 1894 *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (A. C. Doyle)
- 1901 *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (A. C. Doyle)
- 1905 *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (A. C. Doyle)

- 1907 *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* (G. Leroux)
- 1908 *Le Parfum de la Dame en Noir* (G. Leroux)
- 1913 *Rouletabille chez le Tsar* (G. Leroux)
- 1914 *The Valley of Fear* (A. C. Doyle)
- 1916 *Le Château Noir (Rouletabille à la Guère I)* (G. Leroux)
- Les Étranges Noces de Rouletabille (Rouletabille à la Guère II)* (G. Leroux)
- 1917 *His Last Bow* (A. C. Doyle)
- 1920 *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (A. Christie)
- Rouletabille chez Krupp* (G. Leroux)
- 1922 *Le Crime de Rouletabille* (G. Leroux)
- 1923 *Rouletabille chez les Bohémiens* (G. Leroux)
- 1927 *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (A. C. Doyle)
- 1928 *The Complete Sherlock Holmes Short Stories* (A. C. Doyle)
- Publication of Van Dine's 20 Rules
- 1929 Publication of Knox's Decalogue

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Christie A., *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920). Project Gutenberg, e-Book edition, 2018; <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/863/863-h/863-h.htm> last visited: May, 18th;

Christie A., *Murder on the Links* (1923). Project Gutenberg, e-Book edition, 2019; <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/58866/58866-h/58866-h.htm> last visited: June, 26th;

Christie A., *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926). William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, Glasgow, 1985;

Christie A., *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930). Berkley Edition, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1984; https://archive.org/details/murderatvicarage00chri_0/page/n5 last visited: July, 28th;

Christie A., *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934). The Albatross Crime Club, Vol. 121. The Albatross Verlag G.M.B.H., Hamburg, 1934;

Christie A., *The ABC Murders* (1936). The Albatross Crime Club, Vol. 160. The Albatross Verlag G.M.B.H., Hamburg, 1937.

Christie A., *Cards on the Table* (1936). Harper Collins, e-Book edition, 2003; <https://epdf.pub/cards-on-the-table.html> last visited: July, 25th;

Christie A., *And Then There Were None* (1939). Harper Collins, e-Book edition, 2003; <https://epdf.pub/andthentherewerenone136b4f39e92508a21e464b95762a53e994241.html> last visited: July, 4th;

Christie A., *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* (1940). The Albatross Modern Continental Library, Vol. 575. The Albatross, Rome, 1950;

Christie A., *Five Little Pigs* (1942). Fontana/Collins, Glasgow, 1985;

Christie A., *The Crooked House* (1949). J. K. Hall & Co., Boston, 1988;
https://archive.org/details/crookedhouse00chri_1/page/n5 last visited: July, 18th;

Christie A., *A Murder Is Announced* (1950). Pocket Books and Dodd, Mead & Co., New York 1951;
<https://archive.org/details/murderisannounce00chri/page/n5> last visited: July, 18th;

Christie A., *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953). Pocket Books, Washington Square Press (1955); <https://archive.org/details/pocketfullofryem00agat/page/n5> last visited: June, 17th;

Christie A., *Hickory, Dickory, Dock* (1955). Pocket Books and Dodd, Mead & Co., New York 1956;
<https://archive.org/details/hickorydickoryde00chri/page/n5> last visited: July, 18th;

Christie A., *Dead Man's Folly* (1956). Pocket Books and Dodd, Mead & Co., New York, 1961; <https://archive.org/details/deadmansfollyher00chri/page/n5> last visited: July, 18th;

Christie A., *The Clocks* (1964). Harper Collins Publishers, London, e-Book edition, 2002;
<https://archive.org/stream/agathachristie/Agatha%20Christie/English/Agatha%20Christie%20-%20The%20Clocks#page/n1/mode/2up> last visited: June, 27th;

Christie A., *The Third Girl* (1966). Harper Collins, e-Book edition, 2001;
<https://archive.org/download/TheCompleteWorksOfAgathaChristie> last visited: July, 18th;

Christie A., "The Chocolate Box", in *Poirot's Early Cases* (1974). Harper Collins, London, e-Book edition 2001;
<https://archive.org/download/TheCompleteWorksOfAgathaChristie> last visited: July, 18th;

Christie A., *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* (1975). Harper Collins, e-Book edition, 2002; <https://epdf.pub/curtainpoirotlastcase45541915bfaa0786e8e3589770040b0252830.html> last visited: June, 11th;

Christie A., *Sleeping Murder* (1976). Bantam Edition, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977; <https://archive.org/details/sleepingmurder00agat/page/n5> last visited: July, 18th;

Doyle A. C., *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). Project Gutenberg, e-Book edition, 2016; <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/244/244-h/244-h.htm> last visited: June, 30th;

Doyle A. C., *Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1893). Project Gutenberg, e-Book edition, 2019; <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/834/834-h/834-h.htm> last visited: June, 30th;

Poe E. A., "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841). *The Purloined Letter. The Murders in the Rue Morgue* F, Watts, New York, 1966; <https://archive.org/details/purloinedletterm00poe/page/n103> last visited: July, 18th;

Poe E. A., "The Purloined Letter" (1944). *The Purloined Letter. The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, F, Watts, New York, 1966; <https://archive.org/details/purloinedletterm00poe/page/n103> last visited: July, 18th;

Secondary Sources

Alanko M., *Winds of Change. Social, Societal and Moral Change in Agatha Christie's Miss Marple Novels*. University of Vaasa, Master Thesis, 2013;

Bargainnier E. F., *The Gentle Art of Murder: The Detective Fiction of Agatha Christie*. Bowling Green University Popular Press, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1980;

Benstock B., *Essays on Detective Fiction*. The Macmillan Press LTD, London, 1983;

Brams J. S., "Game Theory and Literature", in *Game and Economic Behavior*, Vol. 6, 1994, pp. 32-54;

Bruss E. W., "The Game of Literature and Some Literary Games". *New Literary History*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1977, pp. 153-172;

Cawelti J. G., *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1976;

Chesterton K. G., "The Ideal Detective Story". *Illustrated London News*, October 1930; <https://www.chesterton.org/ideal-detective-story/> last visited: August, 12th;

Christie A., *An Autobiography*. Fontana/Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, Glasgow, 1978;

Coetzee L., *Detecting Dominant Discourses in Selected Detective Fiction by Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie*. University of Pretoria, Thesis for the degree Doctor Litterarum, 2010;

Danyte M., *Introduction to the Analysis of Crime Fiction. A User-friendly Guide*. Vytautas Magnus University, 2011;

Del Monte A., *Il racconto poliziesco*. La Nuova Italia, Firenze, 1975;

Dove George N., "The Rules of the Game", in *Studies in Popular Culture*, Vol. 4, Spring 1981, pp. 67-72;

Eco U. and Sebeok T. A., *Il segno dei tre*, Bompiani, Milano, 1983;

Ercoli E., "Agatha Christie". *Il castoro*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze, Vol. 144. 1978;

Ewers C., "Genre in Transit: Agatha Christie, Trains, and the Whodunit." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 46, No. 1. Winter 2016, pp. 97-120;

Franks R., "Motive for Murder: Reading Crime Fiction." Peer Reviewed Proceedings of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) Biennial Conference, State Library of New South Wales, 2012;

Filligim C. S., "Revelations from "Cheesecake Manor": Agatha Christie, detective fiction, and interwar England". Louisiana State University, Master Thesis, 2007;

Grella G., "Murder and Manners: The Formal Detective Novel.", in *A Forum on Fiction* Vol. 4, No. 1, 1970, pp. 30-48;

Gulddal J., "'Beautiful Shining Order': Detective Authority in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*." *Journal of Detection* Vol. 34, No. 1, 2016, pp. 11-21;

Hühn P., *The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction*. MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Vol. 33, No. 3, Fall 1987, pp. 451-466;

Haycraft H., *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story*. D. Appleton - CenturyCompany Inc., New York, 1941;

Holman G., "What Is The Appeal Of Detective Fiction?" Dissertation, s.l., s.n., 1981;

Knox R. "Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction.", in *Best Detective Stories 1928-1929*, 1929, quoted by Dove;
<http://www.classiccrimefiction.com/commandments.htm> last visited: July, 18th

Książopolska I., "Metafictional Agatha Christie: Self-Parody as the Perfect Crime", *A Journal of Detection*, Vol. 34, No. 1, Spring 2016, pp. 31-40;

Larkins P. E. M., "The Anatomy of the Detective Novel", Loughborough University Institutional Repository, Master Thesis, 1976;

Lehman D., *The Perfect Murder: A Study in Detection*. University of Michigan Press, 2000; originally published in New York by Free Press, 1989;

Maida P. and Spornick N., *Murder She Wrote: a Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction*. Bowling Green State University Popular Press, Ohio, 1982;

Madoeuf A., "Murder on the Orient Express: a Literary and Train Journey from Istanbul to Europe." *The Writing of Space throughout History*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, pp. 52-63;

<http://www.cambridgescholars.com/literature-and-geography.halshs-01242611>
last visited: June, 27th;

Moosavinia S. R. and Khaleghpanah A., "The Narrator and Implied Author in Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*: A Reader-oriented Approach." *Applied Linguistics Research Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2019, pp. 11-20;

Ramsey G. C., *Agatha Christie, Mistress of Mystery*. Collins St. James's place, London, 1968;

Rzepka C. J., *Detective Fiction*. Polity Press, Cambridge, 2005;

Sanders D. and Lovallo L., *The Agatha Christie companion*, Delacorte Press, New York, 1984, pp. 32-37, 102-110, 133-135, 139-143, 178-184, 188-191, 203-206, 277-279, 371-376;

Schwanebeck W., "Deconstructing the Detective: Agatha Christie's Poirot Novels and the Role of the Reader." in *Hercule Poirot Trifft Miss Marple: Agatha Christie and Intermediality*, Büchner-Verlag, 2016, pp. 48-65;

Scaggs J., *Crime Fiction*. Routledge, Abingdon, 2005;

Singer E. A., "The Whodunit as Riddle: Block Elements in Agatha Christie." *Western Folklore* Vol. 43, No. 3, 1984, pp. 157-71;

Strout C., "Through the Looking Glass and Back with Agatha Christie". *Sewanee Review*, Vol. 115, No. 1, Winter 2007, pp. 141-145;

Van Dine S. S. "Twenty Rules for writing Detective Stories", *American Magazine*, September 1928;
<https://freeditorial.com/en/books/twenty-rules-for-writing-detective-stories/related-books> last visited: July, 24th;

Veleski S., The "Whodunit" in the Golden Age of Detective Fiction: *The Five Red Herrings* and *Murder on the Orient Express*, Masaryk University, Brno, 2016;

Von Neumann J. and Morgenstern O. *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*. Princeton NJ. Princeton University Press, 1944;

Vurmay A., "Detection or Endless Deferral / Absence in Detective Fiction: Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*". *Dergisi Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 2, 2017, pp. 1127-1150;

Warren Craig A. "Gender and Moral Immaturity in Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*." *CEA Critic*, Vol. 73, No. 1, 2010, pp. 51–63;

Xu X., "The Plot Construction in Agatha Christie's Novels". *Asian Social Science*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2009, pp. 133-136;

Wells C., *The Technique of Mystery Story* (1913), e-Book edition, 2007;
<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks07/0701151h.html> last visited: June, 30th.

Websites

<https://ferrucci.wordpress.com/2013/09/03/detfic-19-emile-gaboriau/>

last visited: April, 26th;

<https://www.agathachristie.com>

last visited: May, 21st;

<https://www.britannica.com/art/nursery-rhyme>

last visited: June, 11th;

<https://allnurseryrhymes.com/one-two-buckle-my-shoe/>

last visited: June, 11th.

Riassunto

La tesi si pone come obiettivo quello di inquadrare Agatha Christie in un contesto letterario ben definito, che concepisce il romanzo giallo come un gioco tra diverse parti, ossia l'autore e il lettore, l'assassino e il detective. Tale analisi vuole dimostrare, nei limiti di uno studio relativo solo alle opere della Christie in cui ciò è più evidente, come la giallista inglese usi il tema del gioco per introdurre novità in un genere già solidamente codificato. In questa prospettiva ho preso in considerazione i quattro romanzi più innovativi di Agatha Christie: *L'Assassinio di Roger Ackroyd* (1926), *Assassinio sull'Orient Express* (1934), *Dieci Piccoli Indiani* (1939) e *Sipario: l'ultima avventura di Poirot* (1975), i cui titoli originali sono rispettivamente *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *And Then There Were None* e *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*. Ho inoltre inteso di mostrare come la Christie nei suoi romanzi interagisca con il tema del gioco, rendendolo di volta in volta una sorta di sfida in una caccia all'omicida, un gioco di carte e facendo uso di filastrocche per bambini.

Il corpo della tesi si compone di tre capitoli. Nel primo ho voluto offrire una visione d'insieme relativa ai giallisti che hanno preceduto Agatha Christie e che hanno gettato le basi della tradizione, e stabilito quindi le regole di questo gioco singolare. In questa prospettiva, l'autore che sicuramente ricopre un ruolo fondamentale per la nascita del genere è l'americano Edgar Allan Poe. Egli è infatti riconosciuto da tutti gli studiosi come il padre del racconto giallo: il suo "I Delitti di Rue Morgue", pubblicato nel 1841, è considerato il primo racconto poliziesco. A questo seguirono "Il Mistero di Marie Rogêt" nell'anno successivo, "Lo Scarabeo d'Oro" nel 1943 e "La Lettera Rubata" nel 1945. È tuttavia opportuno precisare che "Lo Scarabeo d'Oro" non è considerato dagli studiosi un racconto giallo in senso stretto, poiché l'autore fornisce al lettore tutti gli indizi solo dopo che la soluzione è stata svelata. Poe è anche il creatore

del primo detective della storia del poliziesco: si tratta di Auguste Dupin, personaggio geniale, dotato di grande capacità analitica e deduttiva.

Un altro autore fondamentale e che ha dato un contributo notevole alla canonizzazione della figura del detective è sicuramente Émile Gaboriau, creatore del signor Lecoq. Tra le opere più conosciute dello scrittore francese si ricordano *L'affare Lerouge* (1863) e *Il Dramma d'Orcival* (1867). Gaboriau ha il merito di aver accompagnato la transizione da Poe a Conan Doyle, considerati dalla critica i più influenti predecessori della Christie.

Nella mia dissertazione mi sono inoltre occupata brevemente di Wilkie Collins, creatore del sergente Cuff. Il romanzo di Collins, *La Pietra di Luna* (1868), di cui Cuff è il protagonista, costituisce una tappa decisiva nello sviluppo del genere giallo, dal momento che l'attenzione è focalizzata per la prima volta sul processo di investigazione, piuttosto che sul crimine stesso. Degni di menzione sono anche Charles Dickens con *Casa Desolata* (1852) e *Il Mistero di Edwin Drood* (1870), e Gaston Leroux. Quest'ultimo lascia la sua impronta nella storia del poliziesco, poiché il suo reporter investigativo Rouletabille risolverà brillantemente *Il Mistero della Camera Gialla* (1907), un inquietante enigma posto da un omicidio commesso in una stanza chiusa. Ma l'autore con cui la Christie si è confrontata in maniera più significativa, e di cui è debitrice, è sicuramente Arthur Conan Doyle. Il suo detective geniale e idiosincratico Sherlock Holmes, accompagnato dal fido dottor Watson, ha scritto la storia del giallo. Proprio a Holmes e Watson si ispira la Christie all'inizio della sua carriera letteraria; la Regina del Giallo infatti crea il personaggio di Hercule Poirot, anch'egli detective brillante e singolare come Sherlock Holmes, e gli affianca un fido aiutante, il capitano Hastings, nel ruolo di narratore delle vicende. Hastings, come Watson, rappresenta inoltre la proiezione del lettore nel romanzo, poiché il lettore viene a conoscenza di ciò che il narratore-aiutante pensa, vede e sente. Dopo i primi romanzi sul modello Holmes-Watson, la Christie si allontanerà da questo schema, facendo partire

Hastings per le Americhe e lasciando il suo detective belga a investigare in solitaria.

Oltre a tracciare una sorta di linea storica degli autori di romanzi e racconti polizieschi, mi sono soffermata sui motivi del successo del genere giallo e sui suoi sottogeneri, analizzando più approfonditamente le figure fondamentali del detective, del suo aiutante e della vittima, che costituiscono lo schema strutturale di tutti i romanzi. Il romanzo giallo non trae il suo successo esclusivamente dal desiderio dei lettori di voler conoscere il colpevole. Sicuramente la forma scorrevole e diretta, la quale non lascia spazio a divagazioni tematiche che ne appesantirebbero il ritmo incalzante, gioca un ruolo importante. Il giallo inoltre rispecchia il desiderio di ordine e giustizia intrinseco nel lettore, poiché alla fine i colpevoli vengono arrestati e l'ordine naturale delle cose è ristabilito. Tuttavia, mi sento infine di condividere un pensiero di Chesterton, affermato scrittore e giallista. Secondo Chesterton il motivo principale per cui il romanzo giallo continua a riscuotere un clamoroso successo di pubblico è che al lettore piace sentirsi ingannato dalla trama del libro. Non è infatti soddisfacente la lettura di un giallo che lascia indovinare il colpevole nel bel mezzo del libro.

A tradizione ormai consolidata, le regole del gioco del romanzo giallo erano percepite così chiaramente, che Van Dine prima e Knox poi stilarono le loro liste di regole per la buona riuscita di un romanzo poliziesco, e altri autori pubblicarono i loro manuali con indicazioni su come scrivere un buon libro giallo. Tutte queste schematizzazioni puntavano in direzione del principio fondamentale del “fair play” nei confronti del lettore; in altre parole, l'autore doveva fornire ai lettori tutti gli indizi per dare loro la possibilità di giungere alla soluzione usando le loro capacità deduttive.

Il secondo capitolo della tesi tratta specificatamente di Agatha Christie. I suoi detective più famosi sono Hercule Poirot, curioso ometto dalla testa a forma d'uovo e un maestoso paio di baffi, e Miss Jane Marple, arguta zitella di paese. Dopo una breve presentazione dell'autrice mi sono soffermata sui

quattro romanzi che considero più innovativi ed esemplificativi della mia tesi. Tra questi, *L'Assassinio di Roger Ackroyd* è sicuramente quello che ha creato più scandalo tra i contemporanei della Christie. Il *coup de théâtre* di fare proprio del narratore, nonché aiutante di Poirot, l'omicida, sconvolge infatti i canoni della tradizione del genere ed è fonte di aspre critiche per l'autrice, accusata di aver voluto deliberatamente ingannare il lettore, togliendogli ogni speranza di giungere alla soluzione del caso con le proprie capacità.

Il secondo romanzo oggetto della mia analisi è *Assassinio sull'Orient Express*. La sua brillante soluzione, che oggi è nota al grande pubblico, ha rappresentato all'epoca un vero e proprio sconvolgimento del canone: mentre il lettore cerca il colpevole tra i passeggeri del famoso treno, l'autrice rivisita completamente la regola secondo cui ci deve essere un solo colpevole, rendendo tutti i viaggiatori del vagone ugualmente colpevoli.

Il successivo romanzo analizzato, *Dieci Piccoli Indiani*, è un altro tra i romanzi più conosciuti della Christie. Esso sfida una delle certezze più consolidate del lettore e va contro uno tra i più banali assiomi del genere, secondo cui una vittima non può essere l'assassino. Il lettore si trova di fronte ad un vero e proprio rompicapo quando quella che sembra essere l'ultima superstite dell'isola è indotta da qualcun altro a impiccarsi. Il colpo da maestro dell'autrice consiste nell'aver messo in scena la morte dell'assassino, che poteva quindi continuare ad agire insospettato. A questa trovata geniale si aggiunge un altro aspetto singolare per un romanzo poliziesco: l'utilizzo di una filastrocca per bambini, che costituisce il filo conduttore degli omicidi di dieci assassini già scampati alla giustizia e riuniti sull'isola.

In *Sipario*, ultimo romanzo analizzato nel secondo capitolo, Christie mette ancora una volta in discussione le regole del gioco, programmando la morte del suo detective principale, Hercule Poirot. Ma ciò che è ancora più sconvolgente, è che prima di farlo morire lo trasforma in un assassino, così da fargli vivere un finale di carriera investigativa che va apparentemente contro tutti i suoi ideali di giustizia.

Nel terzo capitolo infine, come già anticipato, mi sono occupata dell'importanza del tema del gioco nello sviluppo della trama di alcuni romanzi di Agatha Christie. Ne ho scelti cinque, poiché mi è sembrato che in questi il rapporto con il suddetto tema fosse più evidente. Si tratta di *La Serie Infernale* (1936), *Carte in Tavola* (1936), *Poirot non sbaglia* (1940), *Il Ritratto di Elsa Greer* (1942) e *Polvere negli Occhi* (1953). È interessante notare come i titoli originali (rispettivamente *The ABC Murders*; *Cards on the Table*; *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*; *Five Little Pigs*; *A Pocket Full of Rye*) siano, nella quasi totalità dei casi, completamente diversi da quelli in traduzione. Ciò deriva dai riferimenti dei titoli a una tradizione culturale britannica che i lettori stranieri non coglierebbero. Negli ultimi tre romanzi citati, ad esempio, il titolo riprende il verso della filastrocca utilizzata dalla Christie nel libro, e, nel caso di *The ABC Murders*, “ABC” è un riferimento a una guida ferroviaria molto conosciuta in Inghilterra.

Christie si serve nei modi più svariati del tema del gioco: in *La Serie Infernale* il gioco si presenta sotto forma di caccia al tesoro, o meglio caccia all'omicida; *Carte in Tavola* si svolge durante una partita a bridge, in cui il gioco diventa lo specchio della personalità dei giocatori; negli altri tre romanzi il gioco assume la forma di una filastrocca per bambini. Dall'analisi di questi ultimi tre romanzi, infatti, emerge che l'autrice ama costruire le sue trame e i suoi personaggi proprio sullo sfondo di filastrocche per bambini.